

THE BLACK IMAGE

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Fergus Hume

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THE BLACK IMAGE

OTHER POPULAR NOVELS

— BY —

FERGUS HUME,

PUBLISHED BY

WARD, LOCK & CO., LIMITED.

In variously priced editions.

THE CARETAKER.
THE LOST PARCHMENT.
THE MYSTERY QUEEN.
RED MONEY.
THE SOLITARY FARM.
THE SPIDER.
THE THIRTEENTH GUEST.
NEXT DOOR.
THE SILENT SIGNAL.
THE RED BICYCLE.
THE GREY DOCTOR.



"Melicent Hurst and the goddess Hecate."

The Black Image]

[Frontispiece

THE BLACK IMAGE

BY
FERGUS HUME

Author of
"The Mystery of a Hansom Cab," "The Red Bicycle," etc.

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CONTENTS.

CHAPTER	PAGE
I.—THE LEGEND.	7
II.—THE OMEN	22
III.—TROUBLE	34
IV.—STILL A MYSTERY	47
V.—SCANDAL	60
VI.—THE UNEXPECTED HAPPENS	74
VII.—AN EXPLANATION	90
VIII.—THE CURSE OF HECATE	104
IX.—A NINE DAYS' WONDER	117
X.—MELICENT'S VOW	130
XI.—SMALL NOthings	142
XII.—TOBY'S UNCLE	154
XIII.—DOUBTS	168
XIV.—THE SHADOW OF EVIL	180
XV.—ACCIDENTS	192
XVI.—MRS. FRINT'S ADVICE	205
XVII.—DIPLOMACY	218

1521172

CHAPTER	PAGE
XVIII.—A SURPRISE	230
XIX.—JUM'S STORY	242
XX.—LADY GIBSON'S STORY	254
XXI.—PART OF THE TRUTH	269
XXII.—THE SECRET OF HECATE	281
XXIII.—NEMESIS	292
XXIV.—THE WHOLE TRUTH	307

THE BLACK IMAGE.

CHAPTER I.

THE LEGEND.

“**V**ERY impressive, quite delightful, really unique,” gushed Lady Gibson, putting up her lorgnette, only to qualify her praise with a shrug. “But how very, very like a cemetery.”

“Without tombstones,” corrected the Squire, who disapproved of the description as applied to his favourite haunt.

“Oh, really, you know, Mr. Hurst, that statue over there looks just like a dinky tombstone, put up to some dear, dead thing, with gold brushing her bosom and all that Browning kind of poetry.”

“It is an image of Hecate, Lady Gibson.”

“How very interesting! Hecate! Hecate! Where have I met her? Oh, yes! Some one in ‘Macbeth,’ isn’t she? Dear Shakespeare; so very sweet, you know!”

“Hecate is the Queen of Ghosts and Shades in Greek mythology,” explained the Squire’s brother, who was the encyclopædia of the family.

“Ghosts! Shades!” said Lady Gibson flippantly. “Is there any real difference between the two, Mr. Ralph?”

The stout, genial man laughed loudly in his obtrusive way. "You have me: you have me," he admitted; "but, as a matter of fact, that statue was erected by Sir Amyas Hurst in the reign of the first James, for—for"—he hesitated a trifle—"well, for necromantic purposes."

"Invoking the dead, he means," interpreted the Squire, seeing that his guest was puzzled by the unusual word.

"Ah, yes, exactly; just what I said. A cemetery, a charnel-house, a graveyard."

Although Hurst and his brother objected to the words, the same aptly described the place. It did indeed resemble a cemetery. From where the three stood on the ivy-clothed and moss-grown terrace, stretched an oblong space of ground, surrounded by lofty walls of black brick, looking all the more dreary for lack of creeping plants to hide their bareness. Right and left, even to the terminal wall, were double rows of sombre cypress-trees, so tall, grim and solemn as to almost exclude the sunlight. At the end of the oblong grew yew-trees, old and imposing, while in the centre of this funereal grove—as it truly was—stood a life-sized statue of Hecate, cast in lead and painted coal-black. The sinister goddess, with the crescent moon in her hair, was draped in loosely-flowing robes, and advanced one foot, as though about to descend the broken steps of the platform on which she stood. Her left arm was extended rigidly downward, with its hand grasping a scroll, while the right arm, raised aloft, had the open palm turned towards the house, as if in salutation: Or perhaps, it might be—as Hurst explained—that a benediction was intended.

In direct contrast to the mournful aspect of the place, where even the closely-shorn grass lacked vivid colour, were the three people standing on the

terrace. The men wore flannels, and Lady Gibson looked quite virginal in an airy chiffon creation from Paris, which had cost more than she liked to admit, even to her extravagant self. Although elderly, she was smart, up-to-date, and artificially youthful; invariably presenting herself to an astonished world as an *ingénue*. Painted and powdered, padded out, squeezed in, touched up, and fashionably coiffured, she looked a trifle over thirty in the daytime, and just twenty years of age at night, when the lights had pink shades. As she had reached fifty, this was something of a feat.

The Squire resembled his guest in some ways, being a dry chip of a man, as thin and short as his brother was tall and stout. His face was as nature intended it to be, although he wore a blonde wig and his teeth were false. He dressed youthfully, and affected a jaunty demeanour, which cost him dear because of gout and rheumatism. Both Hurst and Lady Gibson were quite desperate in trying to regain their vanished youth, and on the whole succeeded very creditably. Without such efforts they would have been cast long since on the rubbish heap of old age.

As for Ralph Hurst, with his heavy figure and rolling gait, he was too positively a philosopher to indulge in an unequal duel with Father Time. His rotund shape, his round, ruddy face, clean-shaven as that of a monk, his keen grey eyes and plentiful white locks, showed that he was content to grow old gracefully. And in dress he was the reverse of his brother, being as indifferent to what he wore as the Squire was particular. Creased and somewhat soiled flannels, a dilapidated straw hat, and down-at-heel dancing shoes, characterised one brother, while a spotless white garb, a crimson cummerbund, neat brown boots, and a panama

indicated the particularity of the other. Edgar smoked a cigarette, trifled with a scented handkerchief, and used a monocle while he twisted his smart moustache. Ralph indulged in a dingy pipe, had a book sticking out of his pocket, and ruffled his hair into an untidy mop, when the conversation became unusually interesting. The younger man was of the pundit caste; the elder a follower of Epicurus. It was a fraternal exhibition of Bohemia and Belgravia.

"You don't object to having tea here, Lady Gibson?" asked the Squire.

"In the Sanctuary," supplemented Ralph, and joining in the conversation in his blundering fashion, for Edgar liked to have the limelight all to himself.

"Oh, that's what it's called, I suppose? How perfectly charming and mysterious! Tea here? Why not? So Arcadian, you know. How suggestive of the Garden of Sleep some one wrote ages ago. And Melicent can tell us the legend of the Hecate creature, when the tea arrives. By the way"—she swept the Sanctuary with her lorgnette vivaciously—"where is Melicent?"

"With Miles," said Ralph, again joining in. "Can you imagine the two being apart for a single moment?"

"They will be when they marry—and for many moments, if I know anything of matrimony. Lovers are all very well, but married people——" Here Lady Gibson shrugged, in what she considered her inimitable way, and twirled round to shake her lorgnette in the Squire's face. "You naughty man, to leave Sylvia alone with those who don't want her. She should be with you, if what Mr. Ralph says is to be believed."

"Sylvia's mother supplies the place of Sylvia," replied the Squire gallantly.

"Thanks for the compliment ; but she shouldn't. Mothers-in-law, both off and on the stage, are proverbially disagreeable."

"Mine will be an exception." Hurst kissed her gloved hand and bowed stiffly, while Ralph smiled ironically at this complimenting of the frivolous and elderly. The sight of mutton dressed as lamb tickled him immensely, and with some difficulty he turned a natural laugh into a portentous sigh.

"Why so sad?" asked Lady Gibson gaily, as they descended the steps.

"Can you ask? My brother has been engaged for the last three hours to your charming daughter. Miles is the property of my niece Melicent. But I, my dear lady——" He imitated the famous shrug cleverly and sighed again.

"There's Mademoiselle Clarice, you know," she suggested maliciously, "that teacher in the village, though what she teaches I don't know."

"Oh, she's my brother's protégée, not mine."

Hurst frowned. "I explained to you all about Mam'zel Clarice when you were here last, Lady Gibson," he said stiffly, "she is the daughter of my old tutor, who died ages ago. He married a French wife, and had this one daughter. After the mother died—she went to live in Paris when her husband passed away—the daughter came to ask for my help, being penniless. I got her the post of governess in the Serbery Girls' School, three miles away."

"Yes, I know," said Lady Gibson suspiciously. "But why doesn't she live at Serbery instead of in Grenacer?"

"A whim." Hurst shrugged his spare shoulders. "She goes to and fro on a motor-bicycle, and rides very well."

"Edgar gave her the motor-bicycle," said

Ralph significantly. "He can't do enough for the girl."

"Girl? I haven't seen her, of course, but—girl?"

"She's thirty, if you call that a girl's age," snapped the Squire, who was growing restive, "and I do what I can for her, as my old tutor did much for me. Her name's Brown," he added, somewhat unnecessarily, "but she's called Mam'zel Clarice by every one here."

"Mademoiselle Clarice," corrected Lady Gibson.

"No, Mam'zel Clarice. We are not very good French scholars in these parts."

Lady Gibson said no more, as the Squire was too good a match for her daughter for her to risk a quarrel. But she doubted Mam'zel Clarice, the more so because she had not seen her. With a mental resolve to question Mrs. Frint, the housekeeper, about this foreigner, Lady Gibson briskly turned the conversation, and waved her lorgnette towards the house.

"Here come Melicent and Sylvia!"

"And Miles Darch," said the irrepressible Ralph, in his heavy, pertinacious way.

The three who appeared on the terrace were as young and good-looking as the others were elderly and plain. Melicent was dainty, tiny and fragile, brown-haired, brown-eyed and alluringly attractive, while Sylvia, a tall brunette, looked cold, statuesque and imposingly handsome. Miles, the barrister engaged to the Squire's only child, had no excessive pretensions to being an Apollo. He was of the fair, clear-skinned Saxon type, heavily built and muscular, well-groomed and smart in his comfortable suit of grey flannel. His calm eyes and firm mouth showed that he was one who could be depended upon in time of trouble. Not that there had been any demand

upon his reserves of strength in this direction, for hitherto the stream of his existence had passed through flowering meadows under a sunny sky. And, indeed, the lives of all present had been more or less easy-going, save that of Lady Gibson, who confessed to the crumpled rose-leaf of her husband's death. Not that she mourned the event greatly, although she always made capital out of it. He had not left her well off, and that really was a trial. However, now that Sylvia was to marry the wealthy Squire, all would be well. Of course, Sylvia objected to the engagement, as she loved some one else. So ridiculous, thought the scheming mother, seeing that the some one else hadn't a penny and was merely a shabby young doctor with a limited practice.

"Here we are, dad!" cried Melicent, dancing gaily down the steps, "hungry as I don't know what. Oh!"—she stopped short—"where's the tea? What a howling shame it isn't ready!"

"My dear child, how—you—do—talk," said Lady Gibson, feeling it her duty to be shocked. "I hope Sylvia will improve your speech when she takes the place of your lamented mother."

"No one can take the place of my mother," replied the girl coldly, and retorting in the same way. "How—you—do—talk, Lady Gibson. Sylvia and I are good friends, and I hope will continue so; but none of the maternal business, thank you very much," and she swept an ironical curtsey.

Lady Gibson looked daggers, but Sylvia smiled in a chilly way. She was fond of Melicent, who had been to school with her and held her mother at arm's length for the same reason that Edith Dombey resented Mrs. Skewton's solicitude. For Lady Gibson had also been carrying the girl here, there and everywhere in the hope of getting her a

rich husband. She had put her up to sale, as it were, and now that she was sold, smiled as constantly as Sylvia frowned. The girl objected to being an odalisque, and hated her mother for having made her one. Also she disapproved of her parent's would-be juvenile flirtations, for Lady Gibson likewise resembled Mrs. Skewton in her desire to look young and be adored as if she really was young. The pair were ill-matched, and would have been better apart; but Sylvia did not wish the parting to come about by marriage with Edgar Hurst, in spite of his wealth and undeniable position as Lord of Grenacer Manor. Still, prudence counselled silence for the moment, so she merely smiled. But, like her mother's shrug, that smile contained volumes.

Ralph broke the awkward silence which followed Melicent's tart speech. "I say, here's Jum," he cried jovially, as an active, lean lad darted down the steps of the terrace to carry out a laden tea-tray, arrange tables and chairs and settle the ritual of the meal with the celerity of lightning.

"And who is Jum?" asked Lady Gibson, glad of the interruption. "That boy; a page. Oh, yes! But the name." She shrugged. "Dear me."

"I gave it to him," said Melicent, settling down to play hostess. "Jumbo, I christened him, because he isn't a bit like an elephant. Sugar, or no sugar? Don't all speak at once."

"Dear child," said Lady Gibson, with a wry smile, and accepting tea from the attentive Squire, "what an extraordinary sense of humour you have. If I may make a remark, I think this Jum, as you call him, is more like a mosquito than an elephant."

Melicent made a face, and her lover prevented her

from answering by taking that duty upon himself. "Darts about, doesn't he, Lady Gibson? A dragon-fly with his blue suit and bright buttons."

"He looks like one of those dirty, sharp little boys who sell newspapers."

"That's just what he is—or rather was," said Hurst, dismissing Jum into the house with a glance. "Mrs. Frint, my housekeeper, found him starving in London and brought him down."

"You are altogether too philanthropic, my dear Mr. Hurst," said Lady Gibson languidly. "He may be the son of a burglar, and who knows but what he may admit his father into the house to steal."

"I'll run the risk," said the Squire dryly. He found Lady Gibson something of a handful at times.

"Really an awful name," murmured the lady, with a shrug.

"As bad as Toby," hinted Miles, and Lady Gibson's eyebrows went up, while Sylvia's pale face grew pink. For "Toby" was the pet name of the shabby young doctor who aspired to the Squire's betrothed.

"Ah, you're thinking of Punch and his dear little dog," retorted Lady Gibson. "What imagination."

"I am noted for it, so is Melicent."

"Ah! well, suppose Melicent exercises hers in the right way."

"In my direction," said Darch coolly. "Melicent, try and imagine I am a saint."

"Oh, there are limits even to dear Melicent's imagination. Now the Squire——"

"Don't say that I am a saint," interrupted Hurst, with a flourish of his scented handkerchief. "I have no opinion of saints. They are milksops."

"Uncle Ralph is the nearest approach to a saint we have in the family," said Melicent dryly.

"My dear girl," retorted her uncle, laughing in his jovial way, "I am only a saint like the serpent in the bamboo."

"What's that, Uncle Ralph?"

"Why, the serpent is kept straight so long as it is in the bamboo, so I am a saint—if you like to call me so—while I stay within the four walls of my library. And as a saint——"

"You're not interesting," finished Lady Gibson smartly. "Sinners are much more picturesque. And it is about one I wish Melicent to speak."

"What do you mean?" The girl looked puzzled.

Lady Gibson waved her lorgnette towards the Hecate statue. "Tell me about Sir Amyas Hurst, who erected that."

"Ah, there is no imagination about that story," said the girl seriously. "The legend is as true as taxes, and as Barkis says, 'Nothin' can be truer.'"

"I don't know any one called Barkis," said Lady Gibson, who had never read "David Copperfield," "nor do I know Sir Amyas. Tell me about him."

"Yes, do, Melicent," urged Miles, lighting a cigarette. "I don't know the yarn."

Melicent glanced round and saw that every one was in the humour for the story, even her father and uncle, who knew it more or less well. And certainly the repetition of the legend would be more acceptable to the company than Lady Gibson's inane chatter. Sylvia, still, cold and as silent as ever, glanced towards the black image standing so grim and menacing on its squat platform. Composed as she was, the sight of its gloom amidst the yews

and cypress-trees made her shiver—a rare sign of emotion with her. Somehow it seemed as though the statue was one of Fate—of Destiny—of Nemesis. There was danger in its looks and attitude. Unimaginative as Sylvia was, it seemed to her as though, at any moment, this sinister Hecate might unroll the scroll she held in her hand to read therefrom some curse which would blight the place and those present. Again she shivered, and Melicent nodded seriously.

“Yes, Sylvia, I feel as you do. There is something dreadful about that image which frightens me. It means danger and doom.”

“Pooh, child,” said her father, indulgently, “that’s nonsense.”

“Pure nonsense,” chimed in Ralph. “The Hursts have always been lucky. Why should the luck change?”

“It will when the hand closes; that hand which Hecate extends towards the house,” and all present looked to where she pointed significantly.

“Ah, that’s part of the legend, I suppose,” said Lady Gibson, quite unimpressed, for she was by no means sensitive, save where her own well-being was concerned. “Go on, dear, I’m on fire to hear the sweet story.”

“It’s anything but sweet,” retorted Melicent tartly, for the speaker always said the wrong thing at the wrong time. “Sir Amyas lived in the reign of James the First, and was a great traveller for those days. He was for some time in Nuremberg, and from that city brought back a wife.”

“I can see her,” cried Lady Gibson derisively, “a fat Teutonic Frau.”

“You do see her,” said Melicent emphatically, “for there she is. The statue was modelled from Dame Hurst, who was reported to be a witch. And

during the outcry against witches, which was so great in those days, she was burnt."

"Oh!" Sylvia turned pale. "How horrible."

"So Sir Amyas thought, for he loved his German wife dearly. But he was also believed to know something of the Black Art; to have a Familiar and practise weird rites. In some way he managed to escape arrest; people said by bribery in high quarters. Anyhow, he continued to live quietly here, and had that statue cast in lead to commemorate his dead wife. It was painted black to show that he mourned her constantly."

"She must have been an ugly woman, and the black paint doesn't improve her in the least," said Lady Gibson superciliously. "Dear me, what odd fancies men take. I dare say they were the same silly darlings then as they are now."

No one commented on this interesting interruption, so Melicent continued impressively: "Sir Amyas built these walls round the statue, planted the yew and cypress-trees, and spent the most of his days here. He called this place The Sanctuary, and so it has been called ever since. Then"—Melicent looked mysterious—"people began to disappear."

"This becomes interesting," murmured Miles, opening his blue eyes. "I suppose Amyas sacrificed these people to the manes of his wife. Go on Melicent; you freeze my blood."

"There is nothing to laugh at, Miles," she retorted petulantly. "It is a very dreadful story, and mysterious. People did disappear. They used to come to the house—to this garden, and then—they never came out again."

"Where were the detectives?" said Lady Gibson, shocked by this crude statement. "Surely notice should have been given to the police?"

"There were no police to speak of in those days," said the Squire, with a laugh, "and even if there had been, Sir Amyas was too clever to be caught. In spite of his sinister reputation, he died in his bed and escaped the law."

"He was reported to be a wizard, and had learned wizard ways from his late wife," said Ralph lazily, "but Edgar's wrong in saying that he died in his bed, although right in stating that he escaped the law."

"I don't remember the legend very well," said the Squire, firing up, "but I am certain that I am——"

"Wrong, my dear fellow, wholly wrong. Sir Amyas disappeared in the same way as his victims did."

"And how did they disappear?" asked Darch, raising his eyebrows. "I want details. So far as I can gather, they came to this place and—disappeared."

Melicent nodded. "That is all that is known," she said positively, "and Sir Amyas disappeared in the same way."

"What way?" asked Lady Gibson impatiently. "Do explain."

"I can't. Sir Amyas got such a bad reputation from people vanishing, that, as the law would do nothing, the country people did. They came to his house armed with bills and pitchforks and scythes to kill our ancestor."

"He must have been something like Giles Retz, a kind of Bluebeard," remarked the barrister idly.

"You are quite right, Miles. That was his reputation. Sir Amyas sought refuge in this Sanctuary when the mob assaulted the house and—disappeared."

"He climbed over the wall," suggested the Squire.

"No, father. He could not have done that, as the peasants were all round the house. He entered this place and—never came out."

"The devil took him away, maybe," said Ralph, with a laugh.

"So rumour said."

"It's more likely that there is a secret outlet from this place," murmured the barrister, looking round.

"No. For Sir Amyas's brother, who inherited the property, searched, thinking that there might be a secret passage in which his brother was concealed. He found nothing and no one. Neither were any of the other people who disappeared ever discovered. The mystery has never been cleared up to this day, and the statue still stands as it stood then," said Melicent looking towards it.

"It ought to be pulled down," cried Lady Gibson in her artless manner. "My dear Mr. Hurst, when you marry Sylvia, destroy the statue and put up one to your wife."

"That's impossible," said the Squire, while Sylvia shivered at the suggestion, "for the statue is connected with the luck of the Hursts. I am not superstitious," he added gravely, "but I shrink from taking such a step."

Ralph nodded. "Better let sleeping dogs lie, eh, Edgar?"

"But how is the statue connected with your family luck?" asked Darch, rising to walk round the image and inspect it carefully.

"Melicent will explain," said her father seriously.

"I have explained," said the girl quickly. "It is stated that the luck of the Hursts will change should the hand of the image close. As it is now open, it is blessing the house and those in it. Should

it close, it would become a fist, as you can see, and then would menace the Hursts."

"How can a statue close its hand?" asked Miles contemptuously.

"How did the statue walk in Mozart's opera 'Don Giovanni'?" she retorted.

"Oh, if you come to fairy tales, Melicent——"

"It isn't a fairy tale," insisted the girl. "So far we have had the best of luck. But I am sure that one day the luck will change."

"And that will be——"

"When the hand of Hecate closes and becomes a threatening fist."

CHAPTER II.

THE OMEN.

MILES DARCH greatly preferred the country to the town, firmly believing in the poet Cowley's saying, that God made the first and man the last. By compulsion rather than choice he had become a barrister, for his father—a Rutlandshire squire—had insisted that his son should enter the legal profession. Miles, adopting the rash policy of peace at any price, obeyed, although his instincts were those of a country gentleman. Unfortunately, he was a second son, and not the heir to the family estate, but there was compensation in the fact that from his deceased mother he had inherited a comfortable income of five hundred a year. He would rather have taken a farm and enjoyed life as an agriculturist, for he envied his elder brother in being viceroy of the ancestral estate. But the peace-at-any-price mistake—and it certainly was one—committed him to the law. But not to the profits, as he jokingly said, for so far his success as a pleader had not been flattering to his vanity. But he comforted himself with the reflection that he had not tried very hard to become famous. |

The fact is, that, like many another man; over-

ruled by parental desires, Darch was a square peg in a round hole, and was therefore uncomfortable. He did his best to remedy the uneasy position by living in the village of Grenacer, which was in Essex, three miles from the town of Serbery and thirty miles from the metropolis. It was his college chum Horace Smith who afforded him the opportunity of doing this, for the young doctor—he was the shabby suitor of Sylvia so greatly disliked by Lady Gibson—had begun to practise in the district. Smith had taken a roomy, old-fashioned house, too expensive for his meagre purse, and had suggested that his friend should share the same. As Miles was tired of living in chambers, and learned that he could go to town daily, he readily agreed. In this way he gratified his rural instincts and helped the doctor. With what Smith earned and Darch possessed, the two did very well, even to acquiring a small motor-car, which took Miles daily to catch the London express to Serbery, and was used by the doctor in his rounds, which were rather extensive. Darch also took charge of the garden, and enjoyed himself greatly in growing flowers and raising vegetables, while Smith looked after the house, ordered the meals and saw that everything domestic was ship-shape. The two young men were looked after by Miss Robin, a quaint old lady of seventy, who was not unlike the bird, her namesake. She was their cook-housekeeper, and had a village girl under her, as housemaid, parlourmaid, and general factotum. These two women, together with a lad of sixteen, who cleaned the car, drove it on occasions, ran errands, and waited at table, completed the establishment. Everything went like clockwork in this bachelor ménage, for the two men were clever and capable, knowing exactly what they wanted. Then the inevitable serpent entered into their Paradise,

which is a rather harsh way of saying that they fell in love.

And the worst of it was that both were shot by Cupid at the same time and under the same circumstances. Melicent returned from school at Brighton, and Miles, being invited to dinner by the Squire, who liked him, fell a victim to her fresh beauty. On a later occasion Sylvia, who was Melicent's bosom school friend, paid her a visit, and at another dinner, Smith fell in love with her. And as both girls reciprocated the feelings of the young men, the course of true love certainly should have run smoothly. It did in the case of Melicent and her lawyer, since the Squire, having ascertained Miles's income and birth and position, approved of him as a son-in-law. But Lady Gibson, when introduced to Smith, disapproved of him immediately. He was poor, he had a plebeian name; his father was only a moderately rich stockbroker from whom he had no expectations, and his position, as a struggling doctor, was—as she said—impossible. So while Miles was able to see Melicent on all and every occasion, Smith was prevented everlastingly from enjoying the company of Sylvia. This exclusion made him miserable, and he envied the ease with which his friend's wooing was conducted. For quite twelve months Miles lived in heaven, while the doctor lived in the other place, and although the first did his best to cheer up the last, the last found small solace in the comforting of the first. The climax came when Darch, on the morning of the day after the Squire's proposal to Sylvia, broke the news to Smith. They were at breakfast when the thunderbolt was launched, but Darch permitted his friend to finish his meal, as he had permitted him to have a decent night's rest before launching it. Smith turned

pale, dropped his pipe and groaned while Miles sympathised.

"I'm sorry, Toby, but it's true," he said, addressing the doctor by a name which had been given him at Exeter College, as more appropriate to his looks and character than the more classical Horace.

"Why didn't you tell me before?" groaned Toby, dropping into the well-worn saddle-back chair, near the window.

"I wanted you to have a good night's rest and a good breakfast. If I'd told you last night, you wouldn't have slept, and you wouldn't have eaten."

"I'll never eat or sleep again!"

Being in love himself, Miles expected this astounding statement. "I knew it would hit you hard," he observed sympathetically.

"That confounded Squire——"

"Gently, Toby. He's Melicent's father and has behaved decently to me."

"Sorry! All the same, he's old enough to be her father as well as Melicent's."

"And rich enough to be her husband—if you mean Sylvia."

"Of course I mean Sylvia. There's only one 'her' in the world to me." Smith picked up his pipe and turned his miserable, handsome face to Miles. "What's to be done?"

"Nothing at present."

"You are very brave with another person's skin," observed Toby gloomily. "You seem to forget that Hurst may marry her at any moment, and then she will be lost to me."

"There's many a slip between the cup and the lip."

"And 'the horse is the noblest of all animals.' Hang your proverbs. They do not help me in the least." Toby turned to look out of the window,

where the result of Darch's hard work was visible in a glorious display of summer flowers. "I wish we'd never fallen in love," groaned the doctor.

"Speak for yourself, Toby."

But Toby refused to take this view. "We were so jolly here, and were having such a good time as pals. Now these girls come in to upset things."

"Lady Gibson has done that."

"The old harridan."

"Calling her names won't improve matters, Toby. Come and sit down, and let us talk over things."

Smith returned to his saddle-back chair and lighted his pipe with the air of a Christian martyr. "It's all very well for you, Miles. Your future is all cut and dried. You'll marry Melicent, take away your five hundred a year, which helps to keep things going here, and——"

"Oh, if I marry I'll make some arrangement to help you," interposed Darch hastily, for he was too devoted to his chum to leave him in the lurch.

Smith shook his sleek red head. His hair was rather red, and constituted one of Lady Gibson's objections to the marriage with Sylvia, since she always maintained that red-haired men were bad-tempered. "I don't want you to do that, thanks all the same. You'll require all your money to keep up a home for Sylvia."

"Oh, she will inherit Thorswud Hall and the acres around it and the income, so she'll be glad to help you as I will."

Toby shook his head again. "If the Squire marries Sylvia, things will alter, Miles. Suppose there's a son and heir!"

"Good Lord, man, don't look so far ahead."

"It's as well to be prepared for the worst, Miles."

"Well, I want Melicent and not the property,"

said Darch after a pause. "We can exist on my income, and I'll buck into the law and make a name for myself somehow, in a murder case of the worst; that always means money and fame to a smart counsel who gets the prisoner acquitted."

"Then be my counsel, Miles, for I swear I'll murder the Squire before he marries my girl."

"Don't talk rubbish, Toby. Let's look how things stand. Hurst has five thousand a year, the Hall, and any amount of land in this village. On his death Melicent inherits the lot, and failing her, the property goes to Ralph. Not that he wants it, as he has a small income and is wholly taken up with his books. He's a good sort, is Uncle Ralph, and helped me to get the Squire's consent to my engagement."

"Oh, he's all right," said Toby gloomily. "Ralph's a decent old chap, though rather a bore with his incessant information. Seems to like a dull life among his books too, and only goes to London once a month to attend book sales. But I don't see what all this has to do with my loss of Sylvia."

"Well, it has much to do with it, if Hurst marries her."

"He shan't," said Smith fiercely. "I'll screw his neck first."

"Toby! Toby!"

"Oh, it's all very well repeating my name like a cuckoo, but you're not in the soup as I am, Miles. And I wonder at Sylvia; she said she'd marry no one but me. Told me so a dozen times, and now——" Toby made a despairing gesture.

"Don't be too hard on the girl," advised Darch gravely. "You know how her mother drives her."

"Oh, yes, I know. Sylvia told me how the old Jezebel has hawked her about from pillar to post, from Dan to Beersheba in the hope of getting a

wealthy son-in-law to minister to her extravagance. Well, she's got one now, and Sylvia's got a patched-up old rake of a husband who——"

"I never heard that the Squire was a rake," remonstrated the barrister.

"He's all that's bad," cried Smith vindictively, "or he wouldn't want to become the husband of a young girl like Sylvia, who is a flirt and a—well, I won't call her names, bless her. She's driven to it. But if she marries old Hurst I'll curse him, and then he'll be as unlucky as he's been lucky."

"Then the hand will close," said Miles, trying to interest this disconsolate lover in other things, and thinking of the legend.

"What hand?" Toby fell into the trap.

Miles related the weird story told by Melicent, at which Smith scoffed. "I dare say it's rubbish," admitted the barrister, "but it impressed me."

"What tosh! As if the hand of a leaden image could close. Anyhow, it will have every reason to close if Hurst marries Sylvia. I'll make it hot for them."

"How can you?" Darch stared.

"Well," said Smith slowly, "there's Mam'zel Clarice, you know."

"Toby, that's tosh, as you said just now about the legend. Hurst only assisted that poor creature because she is his tutor's daughter. Report says that he has behaved very well to her."

"Report doesn't know everything," snapped Toby, whose usually sweet temper was sorely ruffled. "I attended Mam'zel Clarice for a sore throat, and when she mentioned the Squire and his kindness, she gave me to understand that he meant to be kinder still."

"In what way?"

"In the marriage way."

"Do you mean to say that Hurst offered to marry Miss Brown?"

"Miss Brown, alias Mam'zel Clarice. So she gave me to understand."

"It's impossible."

"Not more so than Hurst's marriage to Sylvia. Should Mam'zel get to hear of that, Miles, there will be trouble, and perhaps Lady Gibson will take offence."

This time it was Darch who shook his head. "Lady Gibson will never take offence, while there is money to be gained. Hurst is rich and she won't let him slip. I'm afraid that your scheme to make trouble by bringing Mam'zel into the matter won't help."

"I wonder if Sylvia would run away with me?"

"She might, and yet—the money."

Smith heaved a sigh. "I know. It would be a shame to drag her down to my poverty. Yet I'll plead with her, and if she will be content to be the wife of a poor doctor and wait for better days, why then——"

"Why not see the Squire and tell him that Sylvia loves you?" interrupted the lawyer, who had been considering matters.

"He won't listen. Sylvia's too beautiful for him to surrender," said Toby bitterly. "Still, if I tell him that Mam'zel Clarice——"

Then the unexpected happened. As if in answer to her name, the door of the sitting-room was dashed open, and on the threshold appeared the very woman in question. The young men rose and stared at her as if she had been a ghost, for there was something uncanny about her entrance at this moment when her name was thus spoken. Mam'zel seemed pleased by the startled looks of the two, and entering swiftly, closed the door with

a bang to wave her hand in a most dramatic fashion. "Ah, yes. It is me!" she declared, ungrammatically enough, but with the air of a Ristori.

So taken aback were the men by her unexpected appearance that they continued to stare tongue-tied. She was by no means unattractive to look at, for although not beautiful, she possessed all the charm of a Parisian woman. Her hair and eyes were dark, her complexion rather sallow, but she had well-cut features, excellent teeth and a perfect figure. This last was attired in a rather bizarre dress of black silk with vivid orange trimmings, and she wore a transparent picture-hat adorned with feathers of the same striking colour. Perfectly gloved and booted, with her face flushed and her dangerous black eyes sparkling, the prosaic English name of Miss Brown suited her less than the picturesque appellation of Mam'zel Clarice. She was evidently in a towering passion, and looked like a fashionable Atê, ready to throw the apple of discord into the centre of the happy group under Squire Edgar Hurst's roof-tree. And this—as appeared later—was exactly what she had come to do. Meanwhile, she merely looked impatiently at the young men, who stared so hard.

"Ah, but I am a ghost, a speerit, that you look so," she exclaimed impatiently, speaking with a strong foreign accent, but carefully, so as to avoid using French words, which she never did in talking English. "Why do you not offer the chair. Fie! It is not gallant."

"You have taken us by surprise, Miss Brown," said Darch, recovering himself and conducting her to the saddle-back vacated by the astonished doctor.

"Ah, yis; it is so, Mistar Darch. Yet you talk

of me. Is it not so ? ” She looked from one to the other, and settled herself comfortably in the chair. “ But I do foolish to ask. Talk you did. I hear my name.”

“ Miss Brown, I——”

“ No, no, no ! Not Mess Brouwn, doctar,” she interrupted viciously. “ Mam’zel Clarice, did you say when I come. The name they do call me in dis village. Ah, well. Mam’zel Clarice, I am when I do teach de girls in de school, though I am all Eenglish in my talk. Is it not so ? ”

“ Yes,” said Darch, trying to stop the incessant flow of her speech and endeavouring to learn why she had come. “ Do you wish to see the doctor, Mam’zel ? For if so I can retire.”

“ Ah, but no. I weesh to see you and him.” She stretched out her hand to stop Darch from leaving the room. “ I know—and I haf come to hear if what I do know is true.”

“ And that ? ” questioned Smith, then suddenly became enlightened. “ By jove, I can guess. You have heard that Hurst is engaged to Miss Gibson.”

Mam’zel jumped up with a crimson face and blazing eyes, screaming her answer in uncontrolled passion. “ It is a lie ; it is not so. To me—to me ”—she tapped her heaving breast imperatively—“ Edgaar is to me engaged.”

The young men looked at one another. Darch answered, as having the surer knowledge of the truth. “ Mr. Hurst became engaged to Miss Gibson yesterday.”

“ No, I tell you ; it is not so. I well not haf it so. But I will go to de Hall to speke to dis girl and I will say——”

“ You can say nothing, for she is not at the Hall,” interrupted Darch, preventing her from opening the door, towards which she had darted unexpectedly.

"She and her mother only came down for the day."

"Then I will see Edgaar. Ah, yis!" she stamped. "He deceive me; he meke a fool of me. We shall see; we shall see."

"But, Mam'zel——" began the doctor soothingly.

"Do not speke to me; do not talk." She turned on him like a fury. "I did hear you looved dis girl; dat you meke her your wife. And yet you let her go. Ah, poltroon, you; coward, you."

"Stop," said Miles authoritatively. "You mustn't go on like this. Why have you come here?"

"Why?" exclaimed the infuriated woman violently. "I come because I do hear in the village dat Edgaar ask dat girl to marry him, and I come to ask if what dey speke of is true?"

"It is true. What then?"

"What then? What then?" Mam'zel turned purple with increasing rage. "Why, then I will stop dis marriage. I tell you dat Edgaar wish to marry me—me, who now speke to you. When I was but leetle, and he was study weeth my fader he say I would be his leetle wife. I say dat again when I come to ask for help from Paris. He is mine; he is mine."

"You had better tell the Squire that," said Smith, hope springing up in his breast, for here was a new and powerful ally.

Mam'zel, who had whirled herself into a seat, now whirled out of it again. "I go to tell him. He shall not marry dat girl. Nevar, ah, nevar!" and shaking her two fists in the air, she tore open the door to dash out of the room tempestuously. The two men looked at one another.

"The Squire is going to have a bad time," said Toby with a chuckle, for he hoped that Mam'zel would prevent the sacrifice of Sylvia.

"I'll follow her," said Darch hastily, going to the door, which was still wide open. "I may be able to throw oil on the troubled waters."

"Don't spoil my chance," urged the doctor, and would have tried to stop his friend from going, but that he was already prevented by a small boy, who darted into the room unexpectedly. "You, Jum," cried Smith, "what's up?"

"Only a note from Miss Melicent," said Jum, resplendent in a bright blue suit sparkling with many buttons, and so restless that he resembled a dragon-fly more than ever. "She wants to see Mr. Darch."

"Something's wrong at the Hall," murmured Miles, who had already made himself acquainted with the contents of the note.

"Trouble over the engagement to Sylvia?" asked Smith eagerly and with a gleam of hope in his eyes.

"No, Melicent doesn't say what is the matter. She only asks me to come at once, as something is wrong. Jumbo, do you know——"

"Yes, sir," interrupted the alert lad before Darch could finish his sentence. "The hand of the statue is closed."

"What's that?" Darch could scarcely believe his ears.

"The hand of the statue in the garden's closed," repeated Jum patiently, and wondering why he was required to give the information again.

The doctor laughed and rubbed his hands. "Then the luck of the Squire is clean out, if your story is to be believed, Miles," he said, with relief.

"The hand closed!" muttered Miles, mystified. "It's a trick. Absurd!"

CHAPTER III.

TROUBLE.

AS it was Saturday, when Miles invariably stayed at home and attended to his beloved garden, he was easily able to obey Melicent's unexpected summons. Smith was as curious as his friend to learn the truth concerning the report of the closed hand, but duty called him to his patients. So he went his rounds in the motor, still fuming over Sylvia's engagement, while Darch strolled up to the Hall. He there expected to find that the change of fortune foretold by the clenched hand of the statue had already made a beginning in the form of a stormy interview between the Squire and the fiery Mam'zel Clarice. It might be that there was some truth in the legend, although, being very matter-of-fact, he could not bring himself to credit the same. But that trouble in connection with the engagement of Hurst to Sylvia should start immediately the image gave the sign was certainly an odd coincidence. The unexpected had happened with a vengeance.

Grenacer was a pretty old-fashioned village of no great size, consisting of many red-brick and white-washed houses with tiled and thatched roofs. In the centre was the village green, from which a quartette of crooked streets branched to the four

points of the compass. At one end of the village a small church of grey flint, with a square tower, stood amidst many tombstones beside the narrow stream. This swiftly flowing river—known as the Gren—flowed in a half-circle round the hamlet, past the Hall and into the flat meadowlands of the surrounding country. The alluvial soil was rich with cornfields, pasture-lands, and vegetable gardens, presenting a peaceful picture of prosperity, and filling up the space between Grenacer and Serbery three miles distant. The inhabitants of the village were mostly agricultural labourers, knowing but little of the world and its doings, as their interests were entirely local. The railway from Serbery to London, together with the coming and going of many motor-cars, and the influx of summer visitors, had certainly brought the villagers more into touch with what was going on. But for the most part they were wedded to their old customs, to their old ideas, and obstinately refused to move with the times. A more lethargic population with narrower thoughts it would have been difficult to find, and they were quite content with their somnolent existence. Thinking that what was good enough for their fathers was good enough for them, they made no attempt to improve, although both the Squire and the Vicar had done their best to awaken them from the slumber of centuries. On the whole, Grenacer was a Rip van Winkle kind of locality, in which nothing happened, or was likely to happen.

Miles loved the place for this very indolence. After the hurry and toil of London it was pleasant to return to this quiet spot and take life easily. It must be admitted that Darch did not do justice to himself ; that he did not use his talents as he should have used them, so that they rusted for lack of

employment. Hitherto his life had been too pleasant, too easy and free from trouble, so that he was not stimulated to exert himself in any way. Had he lost Melicent, had he lost his income, he would have been compelled to move in order to recover what he had lost ; but having everything his own way, he was in great danger of passing through life as an idler and a slacker. Melicent, being of a more restless and ambitious nature, tried to move him from this complacency, but hitherto she had failed. But the time was at hand when things were about to change with him, and the closing of Hecate's hand meant the coming of trouble, which was likely to do him great good. At the moment Miles did not know this, and strolled towards the Hall little knowing that he was walking out of enervating sunshine into the dark clouds of stimulating adversity. Had he been told this he would have laughed the suggestion to scorn, and would no more have believed in such a prophecy than credited the magic closing of the statue's hand. That it was really closed he was obliged to believe, since Jumbo was too shrewd a lad to manufacture an easily disproved lie. But Darch thought that there was some trick in the matter, since it was obviously impossible that a leaden image could voluntarily clench its fist. And what the trick was, the young man made up his mind to discover. For with the discovery of the nature of the trick, the significance of the legend about possible trouble would be done away with. And the whole thing was so ridiculous that Miles laughed himself to scorn for troubling to seek the reason. Yet, since Melicent had asked him to come to the Hall he felt, as a lover should feel, that it was imperative to obey her summons.

"Who first discovered that the hand of Hecate

was closed ? ” he asked Jum, who ran beside him, alert and bright-eyed.

“ Mrs. Frint, sir. She went in to dust and straighten out things in the master’s study, and opened the door leading into the garden.”

“ Why do you call that place where the image stands a garden, when there is not a flower within the four walls ? ” asked Darch curiously.

“ Oh, I know it’s called the Sanctuary, sir. But Mrs. Frint calls it the garden, so I say the same as she says. Mr. Ralph told me I was wrong, and asked me the same question as you have done, sir.”

Miles looked more particularly at the boy’s freckled face and keen blue eyes, struck by the educated way in which he spoke. “ Who taught you to talk in the way you do, Jum ? ”

“ Mr. Ralph, sir. I spoke very badly when Mrs. Frint brought me from London, and Mr. Ralph was vexed. He made me speak properly, and I want to learn, sir, so as to get on in the world. Mrs. Frint, sir, by bringing me down here, has given me a chance of being something better than I was, sir, and I hope to take advantage of the chance. I’m reading Smiles’ ‘ Self-Help,’ sir, and Mr. Ralph is teaching me lots of things.”

“ Mr. Ralph is very kind, Jum. How old are you ? ”

“ Fourteen, sir ! ”

“ You seem to be a sharp lad. What do you think of the closing of the hand ? ”

Jum looked puzzled. “ It’s queer, Mr. Darch. I don’t know what to make of it, sir, unless, being lead, some one has bent it.”

“ Ah ! I dare say you are right. That solution never occurred to me.” Miles was struck by the clever suggestion of the boy. “ But who bent the

"I don't know, sir, nor does any one else. The Squire, Mr. Ralph and Miss Sylvia are all surprised. And Mrs. Frint, sir, says it means trouble."

"Don't let Mrs. Frint's imagination run away with you, Jum. By the way, what is your real name?"

"Frederick Marr, sir."

"Well, Frederick, I am pleased that a lad like you should try to improve yourself, and I shall do what I can to assist Mr. Ralph in helping you."

Jum's ugly face beamed. "Thank you, sir; you are kind."

Miles was quite interested in the boy, and saw that he possessed brains and perseverance above the common. He wondered that he had not noticed this cleverness before, and promised himself to forward the lad's aims. And indeed, remembering how Melicent had rebuked him for his easy-going ways, the barrister felt a certain sense of shame when he learned how much more ambitious this former street Arab was to get on than he was. "You've taught me a lesson, Jum."

"Have I, sir?" Jum looked frankly amazed.

"Yes! Now run on ahead and tell Miss Melicent that I am coming."

Jum sprang forward immediately and shot up the avenue like an arrow from the bow, glittering all over in the blazing July sunshine with his many buttons. And at an untoward moment his few simple words had taught Miles a lesson. The barrister determined to follow this lowly example, and make a better use of his capabilities. It was odd that the hint should have been given to him in this way and at such a moment, when more serious things had to be considered. Miles did not know exactly what to make of it. All he knew was that in some way he meant to rouse himself

from his lotus-eating, and do his best to help his fellow-mortals. And a chance to do so was at hand now, since he might be able to solve the mystery of the closed hand, and pacify Melicent's mind regarding the significance of the legend. With this idea in his head, and anxious to get to work, the young man quickened his pace and soon emerged from the avenue into the space before the Hall.

The building was of mellow red brick, of Tudor architecture and wreathed in ivy, so that it looked eminently picturesque. It was encircled by smooth green lawns bright with bordering flower-beds, and was girdled at a greater distance by thick woods, finally ringed by a high wall of grey flint. Miles let his eyes rest contentedly on this beautiful old English home, and thought how happily he could live there with Melicent, letting the world go by and not troubling about anything. But these dreams were a recurrence of his lotus-visions, which Jum's chatter had urged him to cast aside. So the young man shook himself free from the longing for ease and idleness to spring up the steps and ring the bell. Contrary to ordinary usage, Mrs. Frint appeared instead of the footman, and informed him that she did so, as the Squire had called all the servants to his study to question them, concerning the mystery of the Black Image.

"And I never was so took back in my born days, Mr. Darch," cried Mrs. Frint, who was stout and comely and voluble, "as when I saw that hand closed. You might have knocked me down with a feather, and that ain't no easy task."

She ended with a jolly laugh, in spite of her obvious perturbation, and ushered the young man into the house. In a blue silk dress with cherry-coloured ribbons, a lace cap, collar and cuffs with much

substantial Victorian jewellery, the housekeeper looked rather flamboyant. Miles wondered why the Squire, who was very particular, did not instruct her to wear a less striking garb. But then he remembered that Mrs. Frint was a privileged person, who had been with the Hurst family ever since she was in her teens, and had acquired rather independent ways. She had been lady's maid to Melicent's mother; she had nursed Melicent; she had married John Frint, the Squire's bailiff, who was now dead, and for years had acted as an autocratic housekeeper, trusted by the Squire and liked by every one. If her taste in dress was rather loud, as it assuredly was, no one minded that, so long as everything went smoothly. And under her firm guidance everything did. So being a valuable servant, she was allowed much licence, of which she took full advantage, although she never overstepped the mark so far as to call down reproof on herself. Mrs. Frint was wise in her generation, and, despite her oddities, knew her place.

"One moment," said Darch, stopping her at the door of the Squire's study, just as she turned the handle. "Has Mam'zel Clarice been here?"

"Lor', no, sir. Whatever should she come here for to-day, even though 'tis Saturday and she ain't gone to Serbery?"

"She called on me this morning and said that she was coming here."

"Like her imperence," cried Mrs. Frint, tossing her head, so that the cherry-coloured ribbons in her lace cap fluttered. "I never did hold with that gel, sir, though why I should call her gel when she's thirty, and more, if she's a day, I do not know. The Squire spiles her, Mr. Darch, if you arsk me."

"It's his kind heart, Mrs. Frint, as she is the daughter of his old tutor."

"I never liked that tutor, with his sneaking ways, and I never liked his wife, French and forrein as she was, Mr. Darch. As to the gel, she set her cap at the Squire when she come here arsking for help. But Miss Sylvia's put her nose out of joint, not that I hold with the Squire merrying again at his age. But there, I'm torking scandal, sir, which ain't proper."

She opened the door and ushered Miles into the Squire's favourite room, which he termed his study. The real library was the haunt of Ralph, and was on the other side of the house, near the drawing-room. The study had one door, through which Miles was entering at the moment, and another which led out into the Sanctuary, flanked by two narrow windows. It was not a large room, and was filled with old-fashioned furniture, consisting of a table, a desk, a sofa and several chairs, all of mahogany. On the red-papared walls were steel engravings and trophies of arms, these last being an inheritance from Hurst's father, who had a craze for collecting weapons. There were mediæval swords, Afghan knives, Eastern daggers, Zulu assagais and South Sea spears. In fact the place was quite an armoury of warlike weapons, and although Hurst had no liking for such military things, he let them remain where they were from habit. It was strange with his fastidious tastes that he did this, as these things gave an air of menace to the room, and produced a somewhat uncomfortable atmosphere.

"I see the Squire's got the servants in the garden," remarked Mrs. Frint, misnaming the Sanctuary, as Jum said that she always did. "Go down to him there, sir, for I've got work to attend to. You'll find Mr. Ralph and Miss Sylvia there also."

When the housekeeper went out of one door, Miles went out of the other, and found himself in the gloomy Sanctuary to which there was no entrance save through the study. Hurst was there, with his brother on one side of him and Melicent on the other, questioning the servants, who crowded the place to the number of six. Just as Darch arrived, the examination evidently came to an end, for the servants, being dismissed, filed past the new-comer, through the study and into the back parts of the house. Miles walked towards the statue to be welcomed by the three, who stood near the platform, looking all equally puzzled. And Miles, in spite of being forewarned, was puzzled also, when he saw that the right hand of the image was distinctly clenched in a menacing way. It looked as though it was about to throw something at the house, which directly faced it. Perhaps bad luck, as Miles immediately said with a shrug and a smile, to show that he did not mean his observation to be taken seriously. But Melicent promptly accepted the suggestion in all earnestness.

"It does mean bad luck," she insisted anxiously.

"Don't be silly, child," said Hurst sharply. "How can a leaden image like that do mischief? Nonsense! Nonsense! Nonsense!"

"I agree," remarked Ralph, laying hold of the ladder, which had been reared against the statue to examine the hand. "We are all making a mountain out of a mole-hill."

"Nonsense," said the Squire again. "You are not, Ralph, and I am not. Only the servants talk so foolishly because that silly legend is current in the house and village. But they are all uneducated people, not like Melicent, who has been to school, and should know better."

"She doesn't mean what she says," said Miles soothingly.

"Oh, yes, she does," rejoined the girl tartly. "The legend says that when the hand is closed bad luck will come to the Hursts. And you can't deny, Miles, that the hand is closed."

"What about the bad luck? Anything wrong as yet?"

"There is time enough for that to come," said Melicent gloomily.

"My dear." Ralph laid his great hand on his niece's shoulder, "you are obsessed by the legend. Put it out of your mind."

"How can I, Uncle Ralph, when I see, as you can see, that the hand is closed?"

"Oh, that's a trick," said Darch promptly.

"What do you mean?" asked the Squire excitedly. "Can you explain?"

"That clever lad Jum explained, I rather think. He gave me an idea. But before I tell it to you, let me have a look at the hand."

Ralph nodded in a satisfied way. "I'm glad to hear you talk like that, my boy. Explain and set Melicent's mind at rest," and with a jovial laugh designed to comfort the girl, he held the ladder up, which Darch nimbly mounted.

"The hand is certainly closed," remarked Miles, somewhat unnecessarily, when making his examination. "The fingers and thumb are bent inward towards the palm, with the thumb outside."

"We've seen that for ourselves," snapped the Squire. "What is your explanation, or rather Jum's explanation?"

"He suggests that some one has bent the fingers into the present shape."

Ralph laughed loudly and slapped his massive

thigh. "Good for Jum. I always did think that boy was clever, and so took an interest in him."

"Much too great an interest," said Hurst crossly.

"You can't say that, Edgar, now that Jum has solved the mystery. If I hadn't stimulated his sharp brains, he would not have hit upon the solution."

"How can the fingers be bent?" asked Melicent, not anxious to give up her weird idea of supernatural influences.

"Easily enough," said Miles from the ladder on which he was perched. "The statue is of lead, and it only requires a little force to twist the fingers and the hand."

"Try if you can do so," she said, getting on to the platform on which the image stood, and standing on tip-toe.

Miles did try, and laboured hard to open the hand by bending the fingers outward. But this he could not do, and was not even successful with the thumb, which, being on the outside of the fingers, was more easily dealt with. In spite of his efforts the hand remained obstinately closed. "All the same, I believe the boy's explanation is the right one."

"It isn't," cried the girl obstinately. "If the hand could be closed in that way it could be opened in that way. The statue has done it itself, as a sign that misfortune is coming to us."

"Melicent," said her father, exasperated by this childish speech, "how can an educated girl like you talk such absolute rubbish? A thing of lead and paint cannot act as if it were alive."

"Amyas Hurst was a wizard and put a spell on it."

"Are you crazy?"

"I don't know what I am," said Melicent, who was pale and upset. "All I do know is that the hand is closed and that misfortune is coming."

"And I say that Jum's explanation is correct. The hand has been closed by some one bending the lead, as a practical joke," said Miles, jumping down from the ladder. "Hum! I wonder if Jum is the joker."

"If he were, he would hardly explain his joke," said Ralph dryly.

"I'll see him and make him explain," said the Squire, moving towards the house. "He went on your errand, Melicent, while I was examining the servants. All have been questioned save Jum—silly name that it is. The boy is clever enough and mischievous enough to do what Miles suggests. If he has done this, he'll go back to London straight away."

"Oh, no, father."

"Oh, yes. How dare the boy meddle with the statue."

"We haven't proved that he has done so yet," said Miles, with a shrug and rather sorry that he had suggested the boy's implication in the business, "and if you turn him out, Smith and I will take him as our page. He is too promising a lad to be allowed to go back to the gutter."

"It's the boy's doing," insisted the Squire, who never let go of an idea when it entered his obstinate brain. "I'm sure he bent the fingers in the way you described. No one else could have done it."

The four were in the study by this time, and it looked gloomy after the bright sunshine out-of-doors. Melicent, particularly prone to the effects of light and shade, felt more than ever the approach of some misfortune, and annoyed her father by

repeating her conviction that bad luck was coming to the house.

"Oh, rubbish," he said angrily. "Who can bring it?"

The answer came from Mam'zel Clarice, who flung the door violently open as Hurst asked the question.

CHAPTER IV.

STILL A MYSTERY.

HAVING entered the room as violently as she had done the one in his own house, Miles expected that Mam'zel Clarice would behave as tempestuously. But, for the moment, although labouring under violent excitement, she restrained herself, great as was evidently the effort to do so. She now carried a small bag and a crimson sunshade, but still wore the black gown and picture-hat with their orange-hued trimmings. Hurst frowned impatiently when he saw her pale face and brilliant eyes, but did not seem to be in any way afraid of the woman. This led Darch to surmise that Mam'zel Clarice had told a cock-and-bull story regarding the attentions of the Squire to her charming but uncontrolled self.

"I can't see you at present, Miss Brown. I am engaged," said Hurst, advancing to open again the door which she had closed.

The woman's face flushed, her eyes sparkled, and her nostrils dilated; all signs of a coming storm. Yet she still held her passions in check. "I will not kip you ver' long, Mistar Hurst. It is important what I now ask."

"What do you ask?"

"Is it so, dat you are engaged to dat Mess Gibson?"

Ralph stared, and so did Melicent, for the question was wholly unexpected. And by none more so than the Squire, who looked indignant. "By what right do you come and ask a thing which concerns myself only?"

"Ah. It is, then, true. This Eenglesh Mees is to be your wife. But I"—she struck her breast, working herself up into a rage—"what of me?"

"What of you!" Mr. Hurst looked bewildered.

"Is it me—Clarice Brouwn, dat you trow over, like dust and rags? I who do loove you, and I, you do loove."

"Are you mad?" Hurst turned crimson with rage, while Ralph frowned.

"Edgar, what is this?" he asked severely, for he was jealous of the family dignity.

"This is my private business," retorted the Squire, turning on him angrily. "Don't you meddle. Go away, and take the young people with you."

"Ah, but no. It will not be," cried Mam'zel Clarice, who had her back to the door, and refused to move in reply to the Squire's imperious gesture. "I wish to know if you trow me to de dogs. All sall leeson; your child, your brothar, and dat young man."

"You are quite mad coming here and talking in this way," said the poor Squire, who evidently was perfectly innocent of any attachment to the lady.

"You meke me mad. Ah, yis. I go mad. I am Ophelia in de play. Oh, my Edgaar, do not be unkin'. You loove me; you wish to meke me your wife."

"I never did. It's a lie," shouted the Squire,

stirred up to fury. "I never said a word to you the whole world might not hear."

"When I a leetle child you say you loove me and dat you meke me your wife when I become beeg," said Mam'zel doggedly.

"Is this true, father?" asked Melicent in a scared voice, for she had no particular liking for the woman, who was so theatrical and violent.

"True. Yes—in a measure."

"Aha." Mam'zel drew a deep breath of gratification, thinking she had achieved a victory. "Den you will trow over dat girl, dat de veelage say you marry, and I—yis—I, your own Clarice, will be your looving wife."

The position was so ridiculous that Miles expected to see Hurst take the woman by the shoulders and thrust her out of the room. But he restrained himself nobly, and spoke in a remarkably quiet way.

"Miss Brown, you are making a mistake. When you were a child I did say what you mention. You were pretty and engaging and, as a young man will, I made much of you when I went to see your father. But now you are a woman—and one of thirty"—Mam'zel winced visibly—"you must see that you are talking rubbish."

"You marry me. I come to dis veelage dat you marry me."

"Don't talk nonsense," interposed Ralph, before his brother could speak. "It is ridiculous to think that Edgar wants anything to do with you. I know how kindly he treated your drunken old father, and how he pensioned your mother when your father died and she took you to Paris. And in return for all this you come here on a blackmailing excursion."

"It is not so. Ah, no, you speke cruel."

"I'll speak still more cruelly," retorted Ralph

indignantly. "If I were Edgar I would call in the police."

"You mean well, Ralph; but let me deal with this matter. There is not a shadow of proof that I ever wanted to marry Miss Brown."

"Dere is! dere is." Miss Brown hastily produced a small packet of letters from her bag, and untied the ribbon which bound them. "See, see"—she threw the loose letters at the Squire, and they were scattered all over the carpet—"dos are whaat you say when I was a child."

Hurst made no attempt to pick up the letters, although Melicent stooped to take a couple. "Miss Brown, don't be a fool," he said, laughing contemptuously. "This is a mere farce. When you were a child I wrote you little notes sending dolls and sweets and such-like things."

"You did promise to marry me. Ah, yis," she said sullenly.

"As a child, yes. One always says such things to children. Well, Melicent, I see you are reading some of the letters. What do they say?"

"Only that you are sending dolls and other toys as you said, father. Mam'zel Clarice, you really are talking nonsense. My father is going to marry Miss Gibson. He never had any idea of marrying you."

"I am here, and I stay," said Mam'zel determinedly, folding her arms. "I come to dis veelage to marry my Edgaar."

"You came because you were left penniless by the death of your mother and wished for help," cried the Squire, thoroughly enraged, "and like a fool I got you that post of French governess at the Serbery School. Go away, Miss Brown, and don't make a fool of yourself."

The woman bent and picked up the fallen

letters, weeping as she did so. "I hear vot you say. Haf you the heart to tell me dat you loove me not?"

"Yes, I have. You are placing me in a ridiculous position."

"Ah, you are weecked, Mistar Hurst." She thrust the letters into her bag, and closing it with a snap, dried her tears. "But I will marry you. I am your dea-ar leetle wife; you say so when I was a leetle child. Oh, come"—she advanced as the Squire retreated—"let me trow des aarms roun' dat sweet neck."

"Confound it," shouted the Squire, while Ralph burst out laughing. And, indeed, Miles laughed also, as the scene was purely farcical. "Let go, woman; let go."

But Mam'zel, who had her arms round his neck, would not let go. Hurst was a small man, and she a tall woman, wiry and lean, so he was quite unable to resist her unwelcome caresses. "I loove you, my de-a-ar one," she said shrilly, and kissed him.

While Hurst choked with rage, Ralph, who thought that matters had gone far enough, seized Mam'zel by the shoulders and twisted her across the room. She was forced to let go her grip of the Squire, and reeled against the door in a furious rage, with her hat off and her hair down. She burst out into a torrent of abusive French, then seeing that she was not understood—for none of her listeners could follow her rapid delivery in a foreign tongue—she again took to her laboured English of the broken kind she affected.

"I am scor-ried," she hissed, quite in a transpontine style. "I am despis—cd. You trow me down; you tread on me. Coward. Infamous poltroon——"

"Oh, get out," interrupted Darch unceremoniously,

and opened the door for the exit of this too dramatic lady. "We've had enough of this."

"Take her away; take her away," breathed the exasperated Squire, wiping his heated face with his scented handkerchief. "Never let her come here again."

"I will be revenged," shrieked Mam'zel, and before Miles could seize her arm she had snatched a barbaric, ugly-looking knife from one of the trophies on the wall, and was hurling herself forward on the Squire. Hurst had fallen back into a chair, and was absolutely defenceless, so a tragedy would undoubtedly have ensued had not Ralph dashed the madwoman—for she was little else—aside with considerable force. Melicent cried aloud as Miles came forward to help, and flung herself before her father to shield him. Mam'zel would have undoubtedly made a second attempt, but that Ralph promptly wrested the knife out of her grip, flung it on the floor, and seized her like a baby in his big arms. Mrs. Frint and the servants, attracted by the shrieks of the governess, came rushing into the hall to behold Ralph carrying out the cause of the disturbance. Miss Brown kicked and screamed, babbled in a mixture of French and English, and did her best to escape. But those great arms held her, and Ralph deposited her on the gravel before the hall door, in a breathless and dishevelled condition.

"Peeg! Peeg! Oh, peeg!" gasped Mam'zel while the Squire and Melicent, together with the servants, thronged on to the steps. "I keel you."

"You mustn't keel any one," mocked Ralph, and bent towards her to whisper in her ears sharply and shortly.

As if by magic, Mam'zel became calm, coiled up her hair, adjusted her hat, smoothed her dress, and saw that her bag and sunshade were returned—

which they were, by Mrs. Frint throwing them at her feet. "I go," said the angry woman, with an evil and meaning smile. "But I come again. Then, ah, then, my dea-ar Edgaar, you will suffar. I keel you; I keel you."

"Then you'll be hanged," said Ralph, smiling.

"I care not dat." Mam'zel snapped her fingers. "I am no child to be so behaved to. I keel heem. Bah!" She spat in the direction of the furious Squire, turned on her heel and went rapidly down the avenue. The echoes of Ralph's laughter followed her.

"Mrs. Frint. Thomas!"—this to the footman—"never let that woman enter this house again. And I hope," added Ralph, turning towards his brother, "that I don't usurp your privilege in saying as much, Edgar."

"No, no!" murmured Hurst, who was leaning in an exhausted condition on his daughter's arm. "I have to thank you for saving my life. There! There!" he went on testily, as Mrs. Frint came forward with a smelling-bottle, "that's enough. I'm all right. Melicent, help me back to the study."

The girl did so, as the Squire really was greatly upset by the scene which had taken place. He looked much older than usual; his wig had fallen off, and he breathed with difficulty. However, a glass of port wine brought by Ralph, who insisted upon his drinking the same, a brush down and a short rest in an arm-chair soon made him look more like himself. When he again resumed his wig—the falling off of which annoyed him considerably—he grew calmer, and protested that he was quite innocent of having in any way encouraged Mam'zel Clarice, or, as he persistently called her, Miss Brown.

"I can only find one excuse for her extraordinary behaviour," said the unfortunate little man, who was more sinned against than sinning, "and that is her father."

"Her father?" asked Miles, looking puzzled.

"He drank," said Hurst solemnly, "and I fear this miserable woman takes after him. I hope I'll never see her again."

"I hope you won't, Edgar," chimed in Ralph, looking more serious than was his custom. "She might kill you."

"Oh, nonsense! She was only out of her mind for the time being."

"Well, I hope she won't be out of her mind again and come here," said Ralph dryly, and picking up the Afghan knife, which still lay on the floor. "This is a nasty weapon to stick you with, Edgar."

"Uncle Ralph"—Melicent shuddered—"don't talk like that."

"My dear child, you must look facts in the face. Mam'zel is dangerous, and I advise that the police should be told to keep an eye on her."

"No, no," said the Squire sharply. "I should only be made a laughing-stock, because of the woman's absurd claim. She is a fool, but not dangerous."

"She wasn't over-safe with that knife, Mr. Hurst," said Miles, who was inclined to side with Ralph and suggest precautions.

"Oh, that was only temper for the time being. Besides, she won't be allowed into the house again. Also, for her own sake she will not do anything, lest she should lose her situation."

"A woman will wreck continents to get her own way," said Ralph significantly. "However, if you won't, you won't. I'm going to the library. By the

way, are you going to question Jum about the closing of the hand ? ”

“ No. I feel too much shaken. I shall lie down,” said the Squire nervously.

“ Then I’ll call him into the library and question him myself,” said his brother briskly, and went off, humming a tune.

“ Melicent,” said her father, when Ralph was out of the room, “ go and warn Mrs. Frint to tell the servants that they must not speak of this scene. I don’t want it known in the village. If the story gets about, it may come to Lady Gibson’s ears, and she will make trouble. Go, child, go.”

Melicent, knowing what a difficult person Lady Gibson was, saw the sense of these instructions, and went promptly on her errand. Darch was left alone with his host, who lay back in his chair with closed eyes, more shaken than he chose to confess. It then occurred to the barrister that he might put in a word for his friend.

“ Have you made up your mind to marry Miss Gibson ? ” asked Miles quietly.

Hurst opened his eyes in amazement. “ Of course. I proposed to her yesterday, and she is willing to become my wife. Why do you ask ? ”

“ Well—er—that is—you see——”

“ Come ! Come ! Come ! What is it ? ”

“ She might love some one else,” said Darch in desperation.

“ I know something about that. Young Smith. Eh ? ”

“ Yes.” Miles was surprised at the promptitude with which Hurst grasped the situation. “ Do you know——”

“ I know all that Lady Gibson could tell me,” retorted the Squire, cutting him short. “ There was a kind of flirtation between——”

"There is no 'was' about it," interrupted Darch in his turn, "nor is there any flirtation. Toby loves Sylvia dearly."

"I don't care what ridiculous name you call your friend," snapped Hurst irrelevantly; "but I prefer that you should call my future wife Miss Gibson."

"Certainly," agreed Miles sarcastically. "Well, then, Miss Gibson loves my friend Dr. Horace Smith. Will that do?"

"No, it won't," said the Squire, whose temper was considerably ruffled by the scene with Mam'zel, "and don't be ironical. Though you are engaged to Melicent, you are not to take liberties."

"I don't want to, Mr. Hurst. But I repeat that Miss Gibson——"

"Loves the doctor. Nonsense. If she did she would not have accepted me."

"You are rich and Smith is poor," said Darch significantly.

"Meaning that she is marrying me for my money?" was the angry retort.

"No. I believe that Miss Gibson would marry Toby, poor as he is."

"Then why did she accept me?"

Miles fenced. "Lady Gibson is a clever woman!"

"I'm not marrying Lady Gibson."

"Well, Squire," said the barrister, tired of beating about the bush, "all I can say is that if you really love Miss Gibson, you would make her happy by persuading her mother to let her marry Smith."

"I'm not going to cut off my nose to spite my face for anyone," cried the little man, highly exasperated, "and as to loving Sylvia, I am past the stage of red-hot passion."

"So I think," observed Miles unwisely.

"I'm only fifty-six, confound you," raged Hurst, getting up from his chair in what children call

"a paddy." "I'm young enough to marry again. I admire Sylvia; I like her; I think she will look well at the head of my table, and will be an admirable mistress of the Hall. I give her money and position, asking in return——"

"Love?"

"Nothing of the sort. I'm content to be respected and looked after. I ask her for an heir to the property. And because I may become the father of a boy to inherit, you object to the marriage."

"If you think that I speculate on Melicent being your heiress, and on your death you are quite wrong," said Miles, with a calmness he was far from feeling. "I don't want your money, or your property, as I have sufficient to support my future wife in comfort. Leave the estate to your brother if you like. I don't care, nor does Melicent."

"You know perfectly well that Ralph doesn't want to be worried with the estate. He likes a quiet life in the library. As to your talk of Sylvia's being in love with young Smith, that's all flirtation. Lady Gibson said as much, and she's a shrewd judge of character."

"Lady Gibson says whatever it suits her to say," said Miles injudiciously.

"And so do you, and so do I, and so do all. Anyhow, I'm going to marry her daughter, and the doctor can go hang for me. Upon my word," cried the Squire, flouncing about the room in a petty rage, "I don't see why I should be bothered by strangers poking their confounded noses into my affairs. First that infernal Brown woman, and now you. And—and——" He faltered, gasped, laid his hand on his heart, and would have collapsed on to the floor, but that Miles received him in his arms.

"There! there," said the young man soothingly,

as he deposited Hurst in the arm-chair. "I apologise. I only pleaded for Toby, because he is so miserable, poor chap. Don't worry, Squire, or you'll be ill."

"I'm ill enough as it is, and you have made me ill," said the other sullenly, "and I wish you and Miss Brown and the statue and the whole lot of you were at the bottom of the sea. Frint! Frint! Ring the bell for Frint, hang you."

Seeing that the old man was growing alarmingly violent, Miles did so, and when the footman came, told him to summon the housekeeper. She entered a few minutes later along with Melicent, who had delivered her message regarding the requested silence of the Hall servants. In a querulous tone the Squire insisted that Mrs. Frint should take him to his bedroom, as he wanted to lie down and sleep off the late excitement. He angrily refused Melicent's offer to help him.

"Stay with Miles and teach him sense," snarled Hurst, making for the door on the housekeeper's substantial arm. "Meddling with my business, indeed. I wonder what next." He faced round at the door. "I tell you what next, Darch—the breaking of your engagement to my daughter," and with another snarl he lurched heavily away, supported by the astonished Mrs. Frint.

Melicent was astonished also. "What is the matter?"

"I've only been suggesting that Sylvia should be allowed to marry Toby, who loves her and is miserable because he runs a chance of losing her."

"I know." Melicent nodded and looked distressed. "Sylvia doesn't want to marry father, only her mother insists upon it. But, Miles, it's useless to speak to my father; you know how obstinate he is. We can't help things, and I don't want to lose you. It's that statue." Melicent ran

out on to the terrace, and shook her fist at the image.

"Darling, don't be silly," said Darch, following her, and taking her in his arms. "The closing of the fist means nothing."

"It means trouble, which has already come. And it will mean danger, which is yet to come," said the girl mournfully. Then she buried her face on Miles's breast. "I'm afraid; I'm terribly afraid."

"It's certainly a mystery," murmured Darch, staring at the ominous statue.

"It's trouble and danger, and perhaps—death," said Melicent solemnly.

CHAPTER V.

SCANDAL.

OF course, it followed that the troubles at the Hall speedily became public property. Mrs. Frint's authority to compel the servants to hold their tongues was exercised in vain, although each and every one of them declared that he or she had not said a word. So, as the delinquent could not be discovered and it was impossible to discharge the whole staff, the housekeeper had to allow things to remain as they were. And things were very uncomfortable both in the Hall and out of it. Hurst lay in bed for a few days, and a sick-room atmosphere pervaded the great mansion, while a haunting fear was on all beneath its roof with regard to the omen of the black image. The sudden troubles which had arisen were all put down to the closing of the hand, and the famous legend was told over and over again, to prove that this was truly the case. It was a most uncomfortable time.

Things were just as uncomfortable in the village, for every one talked of what had taken place, exaggerating this and amplifying that until the story attained to monstrous proportion. It was known that the hand of Hecate was closed, and for that reason misfortune was coming to the Hursts.

Report declared that the Squire, having been engaged to the foreign woman, had thrown her over to marry Lady Gibson's daughter. Also it was stated that Sylvia had jilted the doctor, because she wished to marry Hurst for his money. And finally, a rumour spread that because Darch stood by his friend, the Squire declined to have him for a son-in-law. Grenacer seethed with gossip, and the sleepy villagers woke to vicious life, discussing the misfortunes of their Squire with ghoulish animation. The scandal was local and one after their own hearts, since they daily saw the people concerned in the same. A more uncomfortable state of things can scarcely be imagined, yet it was impossible to trace the source of the gossip. Every one had heard the story from some one else, and no one was bold enough to declare that he or she was the original inventor of the tale. Mr. James, the vicar, a well-meaning cleric, actually went so far as to preach a sermon against scandal, but—as may be guessed—he might as well have saved himself the trouble. No one took the slightest notice of his diatribe.

So strong a hold had the legend and its striking verification by the closing of Hecate's hand taken on the imagination of the villagers, that they were quite prepared to hear of more trouble befalling the Hursts. The Squire was ill and would assuredly die ; if he recovered he would assuredly lose his money ; Melicent's engagement with Darch would certainly be broken ; and Miss Gibson would probably elope with Dr. Smith. Or perhaps those who lived at the Hall would disappear, as people had disappeared in the old days, when Amyas Hurst erected the fatal image. Or it might be that the Hall would be burnt to the ground with all under its roof. There was no end to the prophecies of the villagers,

and these being repeated to Ralph, annoyed him considerably. He called in Lady Gibson to talk matters over, for she had come down with Sylvia to stay at the Hall while the Squire was ill.

"Who should nurse the dear man but his future wife," gushed Lady Gibson, and irritated everyone by meddling in the sick-room.

As a matter of fact, she wanted to nurse the Squire herself, since Sylvia steadily refused to do so. Lady Gibson stormed and pleaded and cajoled in vain. Her daughter would not assume the responsibility, and went about obstinately silent. And what was worse, she had opportunities of speaking to Toby Smith, when he came to minister to the Squire. Hurst in some queer way liked the young fellow, and, looking on his love for Sylvia as a mere flirtation, did not object to Toby being his medical attendant. And indeed, had he rejected Smith's services, he would have had to send to Serbery for another doctor. This he did not do, much to Lady Gibson's annoyance, so Toby came and went and snatched a word or two with Sylvia when possible. Owing to Lady Gibson's vigilance, his chances were comparatively rare, but those he did get he took full advantage of. Sylvia's mother scolded her daughter and pleaded with the Squire, so that both might dismiss the young man; but in neither case was she successful. Therefore, when Ralph called in Lady Gibson to discuss the village scandal, she was too full of her own woes to listen attentively.

"I really don't understand your brother," said Lady Gibson with her usual shrug. "Fancy being in love with my daughter and allowing a younger man than himself to make love to her. What does it mean?"

"It means that Edgar was always as cold-blooded

as a fish where love is concerned," said Ralph in his jovial way, and laughed uproariously at the expression of his listener.

"How can you give way to mirth when your brother is so ill?" she remonstrated. "He might die."

"Die? Not he! I am fond of Edgar, who has always been a good brother to me, you know. But he hasn't got much affection for any of us."

"Melicent——"

"Oh, he likes her, but he does not love her as a father should love his only child. He loves no one."

"Sylvia?"

"Not even Sylvia," insisted Ralph positively. "He admires her, and thinks if he marries her she will give him a son and heir. That is the sole reason why he wants to marry. There is no love in the matter. Sylvia might flirt with dozens of men, and Edgar would take no notice, so long as there wasn't a public scandal. I tell you, Lady Gibson, there is something lacking in my brother, for I have never known him to love anyone or anything."

"Does he hate people, then?" asked Lady Gibson, rather puzzled, as well she might be when being thus made acquainted with the Squire's odd character.

"Oh, no. He doesn't hate and he doesn't love. Edgar is purely negative. He is more like a fish than a man."

"Poor Sylvia," murmured her mother reflectively.

"Poor Sylvia, indeed," said the other earnestly. "If you really wish your daughter to be happy, Lady Gibson, stop this marriage with Edgar."

"Certainly not, Mr. Ralph. I wish to see Sylvia comfortable. In spite of what you say, I'm sure the Squire loves her."

"Would he let Smith haunt the house, if he did?" demanded Ralph contemptuously. "Edgar is incapable of love, I tell you. He only wants to marry so as to have an heir to the estate. If he didn't marry Sylvia he would marry some one else."

"But Melicent is the heiress."

"Edgar wants a son to continue the name."

"But you can continue the name, if you inherit."

"I can only inherit after Melicent, and moreover, if I did I can't continue the name, as I am not married. Nor do I intend to marry. Finally, I don't desire to inherit the estate with all its troubles. I prefer my books. So don't bother any more over Edgar's want of appreciating Sylvia as a charming young woman. He loves no one, not even Melicent. All the feeling he has is a lukewarm affection for Mrs. Frint, because she makes him comfortable."

"That woman!" Lady Gibson sniffed irritably at her smelling-bottle. "She's a horrid woman, and won't let me nurse the Squire."

"As you have no call to nurse him, and Sylvia, as you told me refuses to be his nurse, why shouldn't Mrs. Frint attend to Edgar? And she is by no means a horrid woman," ended Ralph, growing red and looking as cross as his invariable good-nature would allow him to.

"Oh, you men; you men," cried Lady Gibson, fluttering her handkerchief. "You are always taken in by women, young and old. I say that Mrs. Frint is a horrid woman and I won't be contradicted. Look how she dresses; just like an actress in a low melodrama, and speaks in a most illiterate way too. Why doesn't the Squire pension her off, and send her to live with her husband?"

Ralph's grey eyes sparkled and he looked really

angry. "Mrs. Frint's husband is dead," he said, breathing heavily. "She married John Frint, my brother's bailiff, who left his situation here after the marriage and took her to London. There he treated her very badly, deserted her and went to America. She returned here and we nearly all received her gladly, as she has lived in this house all her life. Her husband died in New York years ago, and since then she has been housekeeper. And she will continue to be so, always."

"Not when Sylvia becomes Mrs. Hurst," said Lady Gibson calmly. "I'll see that the woman is discharged after the marriage. I don't like her."

"Edgar does, and that is sufficient," retorted Ralph curtly, and seeing that it was useless to talk of the matter to so obstinate a woman, "if Sylvia becomes Mrs. Hurst, or if she does not—and there is much virtue in 'If,' as Shakespeare says—Mrs. Frint will remain here."

"I don't think so."

"I do. There; let us change the subject," and Ralph went on hurriedly, so as to prevent further talk about the housekeeper. "Do you know what they are saying in the village?"

"Yes," admitted Lady Gibson, rather sulkily, for she preferred to go on talking about Mrs. Frint, and resented being switched so pointedly on to another subject. "Do you mean all this rubbish about the hand of the statue——"

"Not that exactly," interrupted Ralph. "I mean that people say Edgar was engaged to Mam'zel Clarice and threw her over to marry Sylvia."

"Oh, I know all about that." Lady Gibson shrugged. "Edgar told me how he wrote letters and sent toys to the creature when she was a child. So ridiculous of her saying he promised to marry her on those grounds."

"Ridiculous, but disagreeable. The woman's tongue must be silenced."

"In what way?"

"By getting her out of the village. Now, Lady Gibson," — Ralph leaned forward and shook a massive forefinger in her face—"only a woman can deal with a woman, so I wish you to go to Mam'zel Clarice and make it plain to her that she must leave Grenacer. If she does, people will cease to talk."

"How can I make the creature leave?"

"Ah, I leave that to your cleverness," said Ralph pointedly. "I am quite sure that for Sylvia's sake you wish this scandal to stop, and so will hit upon some way of inducing the woman to go."

Lady Gibson reflected. She wished her daughter to become Mrs. Hurst and get herself in this way a wealthy son-in-law to supply her with endless cheques, so, as it may be guessed, was prepared to move heaven and earth to accomplish her ends. If the scandal continued the Squire might fight shy of marriage, although she saw no reason why he should. Still, the doubt was there, and Lady Gibson wished to get rid of it by getting rid of Miss Brown. "We can only bribe the creature," she said after a pause. "If you will authorise me to do so and will give me—say fifty pounds—I'll see her and point out that it is best for her to go."

Ralph nodded his approval. "I have thought of that," he said, with an air of relief. "But fifty pounds won't be enough, for Mam'zel Clarice is rather grasping, as I know from the way in which she rooked Edgar."

"Oh, did she," cried Lady Gibson angrily, "the minx. To take money from the Squire which should come to Sylvia. I never heard of such a thing. In some way I'll turn her out of the village neck

and crop. Has she ever been in trouble with the police?"

"No." Ralph laughed at the vindictive question. "She is perfectly respectable, as we learned before Edgar got her appointed a governess at the Serbery School. No one can say a word against her character. But I'll give you notes for one hundred pounds, and you can give her these, if she promises to return to Paris and refrain from molesting my brother. I talked the matter over with Edgar, and we have arranged this. But you, Lady Gibson, will be the best person to settle things with Mam'zel Clarice."

"Mam'zel Clarice—Miss Brown," said Lady Gibson pettishly. "It always sounds as if the creature had two names."

"Oh, no! Her name is Clarice Brown."

"I don't care. She sounds all wrong," said the other confusedly. "I'm sure she is thoroughly wicked."

"And so is Mrs. Frint, according to you," said Ralph dryly. "What a bad opinion you have of your fellow-creatures, Lady Gibson."

"I have a very good opinion of you," she said, rising, and with a smile. "If only you were the Squire, I'm sure you would make Sylvia happy and would not allow that Smith man to be about the place."

"I certainly should not," said Ralph in a rather violent way, "and if I was the Squire, in possession of a good income, I might enter the lists for Sylvia's love."

"Oh!" Lady Gibson gasped, as she never dreamed that Ralph admired her daughter, "but this Smith——"

"I'd wring his neck," interrupted Ralph fiercely; then seeing the astonished expression of her usually vapid face, he calmed down to laugh lightly. "But

I have blood in my veins, not cold water, like Edgar, and when I love, I love."

"But tell me—really, it's not quite right, you know—do you—that is—are you in love with Sylvia?" babbled the other, still startled.

"Only as an admirer of the beautiful. She is too much like a fine marble statue for me."

"She isn't with that Smith creature," snapped Lady Gibson. "However, we must not talk in this way. It is disloyal to the Squire. Give me the money. Four twenty-five pound notes." She counted them. "Thanks. I'll see this woman as soon as possible. Good-bye. By the way, you are sure the Squire isn't so very, very ill?"

"Quite sure. He's only upset over this scandal, and as soon as you get Mam'zel Clarice out of the place, he will recover. Edgar is a bit of a coward, you know, and dreads meeting the woman."

"As she threatens to murder him, I can scarcely be surprised at that," said Lady Gibson uncomfortably. "But, dear me, what a bad character you give your brother."

"No, no! Don't leave me with that impression. I am devoted to Edgar, who is the best and kindest of brothers. But he has his faults, as we all have, and I have remained here instead of going out into the world, so as to look after him. He needs looking after," ended Ralph, with emphasis.

"I'll do that when he marries Sylvia," said Lady Gibson, with a sour nod, and took her departure with the money to bribe Mam'zel Clarice.

On the whole, she was not dissatisfied with the character given to the Squire by his brother, and that evening took her way towards the house wherein Miss Brown lodged, with a contented mind. Edgar was evidently a coward; he was too flabby to love or hate, and was altogether a negative kind

of man, who could be ruled by a clever woman. Sylvia would not take the trouble to rule him, since she cared nothing for him, for his position, or for his money, owing to her craze for Dr. Smith. As Mrs. Hurst she would be more of a beautiful statue than ever, and would fill her position in a half-hearted way. However, that did not matter, for Lady Gibson knew that if such was the case—and the case it certainly would be, since she understood her daughter thoroughly—a clever mother-in-law could hold the reins. And once those reins were in her hands, Lady Gibson intended to get Melicent married and out of the way as speedily as possible ; to get rid of Frint by pensioning her off ; and then she made up her mind to send Ralph out of the house. He was kind and agreeable and popular, but he was by no means a man to be driven as the Squire could be driven. Lady Gibson was a trifle afraid of the younger Hurst, as she believed that he was the power behind the throne, who managed things for that figure-head, his brother. In fact, he had admitted as much during the last conversation by saying that he remained at the Hall to look after Edgar. Lady Gibson closed her thin lips firmly as she rang the bell of the house wherein Mam'zel lodged. It would be easy to get rid of Melicent, but difficult to send away Ralph. As for Frint, it was not difficult to dispose of that creature.

A wan, elderly lady in black, who had seen better days and was always talking about them, admitted that Miss Brown was at home, with a faint smile. Shortly Lady Gibson was conducted to a stuffy drawing-room by the landlady, who drifted before her into the room rather than walked. She would have explained that Miss Brown was a paying guest, and not a lodger, had Lady Gibson been disposed

to listen. But since she was not, the landlady drifted away to inform Mam'zel Clarice that she was wanted. By the light of a dim oil lamp, the visitor surveyed the tawdry look of the room with disgust and put up her lorgnette with a supercilious shrug when Miss Brown entered. But the supercilious look soon changed, when she saw the young lady.

Mam'zel Clarice might or might not have expected a visitor, but she was certainly dressed to receive company. In an amazing evening gown of maize-coloured silk, cut in a style which showed that it came from Paris, Mam'zel Clarice looked astonishingly young and handsome. Her bare neck and shoulders and arms were singularly beautiful, and her figure was displayed to the best advantage in the perfectly fitting gown. Lady Gibson was astonished and indignant, and determined in her own mind that the woman was an adventuress of the worst description, and not respectable. Else how could she have afforded such a dress.

"You weesh to see me?" inquired Mam'zel Clarice, who, informed by the landlady of her visitor's name, was quite prepared to fight.

"Yes, Miss Brown," said Lady Gibson coldly, "I am——"

"Ah, but zere is no need. I do know wat you are, milady. Ze mothar of dat girl, my Edgaar marry—if I allow," she ended viciously.

The challenge was given; the glove was thrown down, but Lady Gibson did not accept the one or pick up the other. She had no desire to be drawn into a vulgar quarrel, and came straight to the point. "I am aware that you claim Mr. Hurst's promise of marriage——" she began, only to be cut short by the voluble Mam'zel.

"I haf de promise, and de letters and——"

"Merely notes written with toys to a child." Lady Gibson indulged in her famous shrug. "A clever woman such as you are must be aware that such letters would not hold water in a court of law."

"I do not wan' de laws," said Miss Brown sullenly.

"I quite believe that," said Lady Gibson sharply. "You look to me like a woman to whom the law in certain aspects would have much to say."

"You dare to teke my character away?"

"Oh, as to that," Lady Gibson waved her lorgnette in the air, "we won't speak of that. I don't know anything about your character, and I don't want to."

"I am quate raight in all vays. And you mus' say——"

"There! There! That's enough, my good woman. I don't wish to hear your history—your probably shady past," she ended sneeringly.

But for once Lady Gibson went too far. With a pounce like that of a pantheress on its prey, Mam'zel flung herself forward, took her by the shoulders and shook her thoroughly. Then she pressed her back into the chair and brought her face close to that of the older woman. "I vill keel you, if you do say vun vord against me. I am amiable: agreeable: honest. Ah yis! You dare to gif me insult and I scratch dat painted face you haf de grin on. Bah!"

With a dramatic gesture, she flung away and swept to the door. This she opened and pointed to, intimating that Lady Gibson should go. And indeed the visitor felt very much inclined to go, for the assault took her completely by surprise. Being a bully, Lady Gibson was a coward, and although she expected a tongue-lashing from the woman, in which she knew she could give as good as she received,

was by no means ready for a stand-up fight. Tottering to her feet, she explained in a tremulous voice that Mam'zel Clarice was mistaken: she had come out of sheer kindness: she had something important to say: she was never so treated before in her life and—and——

"You go away," said Mam'zel Clarice, pointing sternly to the door. "You are, wat I do call a weecked cat—Ah yis. Go."

"But let me explain."

"Speke zen and say wat you vish."

"I wish you to go to Paris and have brought you one hundred pounds."

"Ah!" Mam'zel snarled derisively, "to leef behin' zat daughtar of you to marry my Edgar. I will not go. No!" and she folded her arms defiantly.

"One hundred pounds." Lady Gibson held them out, and tried to recover her ground. "You dreadful woman you——!"

"Vat. You speke so." Mam'zel made another pounce, but Lady Gibson shrieked and evaded her before she could be touched.

"No! No! Do listen. Mr. Ralph wishes you to go."

Mam'zel started, stared fixedly at the trembling bully and reflected. "Ah! he does vish me to go away."

"Yes! Yes! And sends you this hundred pounds."

The woman stretched out her hand, took the money, and nodded. "Mistar Ralph, he vish me to go away: he sen' me dis money. So."

"Yes! He would have come himself only——"

"Oh, I know vell why 'only,' Mistar Ralph. Ah yis. So! I go in a week?"

"Really!" Lady Gibson gasped with relief, as

she had not expected so easy a victory, "Then I can depart."

Mam'zel pointed to the door. "Yis. Go away. Tell Mistar Ralph, dat I go to Paris, because I tink vot I haf no need to tell you. A week : say a week."

"Yes I'll——"

"And you go." Mam'zel suddenly became ferocious, "go, or I keel you. Bah !"

Lady Gibson fled.

CHAPTER VI.

THE UNEXPECTED HAPPENS.

LADY GIBSON returned to the Hall in a battered condition, more mental than physical, though her apparel had been somewhat disarranged by Mam'zel's violent assault. She informed Ralph that she had accomplished her mission at the cost of much pain, and certainly would not go near the woman again. "A most dreadful creature," wailed Lady Gibson, thoroughly upset, when she entered the library to report. "Knowing what she was, how could you have the heart to send me to see her."

"Oh, Miss Brown's bark is worse than her bite," said Ralph, soothingly.

"It can't be. She—she—shook me."

Ralph roared in his jovial, outspoken way. "I'm sorry," he said in answer to Lady Gibson's indignant look, "but really the idea is so funny."

"Funny, Mr. Ralph?" the injured messenger shrieked. "I don't see anything at all funny in being asked to visit a mad woman. And her language!" Lady Gibson shuddered. "She ought to be put into jail."

"I wish she was there with all my heart," agreed Ralph, recovering himself, "for then I would feel much safer in my mind as regards Edgar. I'm

sorry I laughed, and apologise humbly. Really, I never knew that Miss Brown would go to such lengths."

"I have a great mind to bring an action against her for assault."

"No, don't do that. In the first place, you have no witnesses, and in the second, it will be as well to get her out of the place quietly. We have had quite enough scandal as it is."

"I don't want any more, I'm sure," said Lady Gibson, fanning herself with a wisp of lace she termed her handkerchief. "Perhaps it will be as well to pass over her insulting behaviour in dignified silence. And after all, Mr. Ralph, I managed to induce her to go."

Ralph appeared to be genuinely surprised. "You did. I thought that, having acted as you say she did, the woman would not have accepted the money."

"A creature like that always accepts money. At first she refused to listen, but afterwards, owing to my skilful management, she agreed to go."

"When?"

"In a week from now."

"Good!" Ralph did not conceal his satisfaction. "Now I feel that Edgar's life is safe. From the way she had treated you, Lady Gibson, I am sure you understand how dangerous she is."

"I think she is capable of the vilest crimes," said the other positively.

"So do I," was Ralph's grim retort, "so don't say anything about her behaviour to Edgar. It will only make him nervous."

"I shan't say a word to any one but you," promised Lady Gibson, rising, "for I shouldn't like people to know that I had been shaken. Gracious goodness me," cried Lady Gibson, as Miss Pecksniff

had cried before her, "that I should have lived to be shaken. I'm all nerves. I'm shattered. I shall go to town to recover myself, and see my doctor. I might meet that creature again in the village street, and then she might shake me again."

"One never knows what an uncontrolled person like Miss Brown will do," said Ralph gravely; "and I think you are wise to go away until she leaves. Will you take Sylvia with you?"

"No! Sylvia can stay here with Melicent, and can amuse the dear Squire, as he will soon be out of bed and downstairs. So the doctor says. And speaking of the doctor, Mr. Ralph, I hope you will keep an eye on his doings and will not let him talk too much with Sylvia."

"I'll do my best. But perhaps it would be better that you should take Sylvia with you out of harm's way."

"No! I don't want her to leave the Squire. And I think Sylvia is sensible enough not to break her engagement, seeing that she will never get a chance of marrying a richer or more agreeable man."

"Rich, yes. Agreeable—well, I wonder if Sylvia thinks Edgar is agreeable?"

"I'm sure I don't know what she thinks," said Lady Gibson snappishly. "The girl is an enigma, and most disobedient and ungrateful to me. However, I will say one thing, that she has never broken her word, so, however much that Smith man may persuade her, I am sure she will remember that she is engaged to your dear brother. I admit it's rather rash leaving Sylvia here while that horrid doctor is about, but I rely on her honour and commonsense."

Having delivered herself of this opinion Lady Gibson went away, to go to bed and take some sal volatile and generally soothe her shattered nerves. To Sylvia she said little about her visit, save that

Mam'zel Clarice was going, but intimated that she herself would leave for a week's stay in London the very next day. Sylvia expressed neither surprise nor regret at her mother's projected departure, but cast down her eyes and maintained her rôle as a beautiful statue. Lady Gibson said that such conduct was unfilial, but did not succeed in rousing the statue to life.

So the next day Lady Gibson took her departure with a lying apology that business called her to London. Hurst was sorry, as her everlasting small-talk amused his somewhat small mind, and the wonder was that, this being the case, he did not marry Lady Gibson instead of her statuesque daughter. However, as he had proposed to the girl, and had been accepted by the girl, it was too late to change round, willingly though Lady Gibson would have done so. She wanted money, and whether she got it, or Sylvia got it, did not matter, as in either case, owing to the girl being a puppet in her mother's hands, the latter could and would handle the cash. Never for a moment did this modern Mrs. Skewton dream that Sylvia would dare to rebel or alter existing arrangements. Nevertheless, she drew the girl aside on the eve of her departure and spoke seriously.

"Don't go flirting with that doctor man," said Lady Gibson sharply, "for, weak and silly as the Squire is, he may object."

"Since he trusts Dr. Smith to come here and speak with me, I can't see that he will object," said Sylvia calmly.

"Oh, you never know how to take that kind of sheep creature such as the Squire is," said her mother crossly. "They're all right one moment and all wrong the next. All I say is, don't flirt."

"I never flirt, mother. I love Toby too deeply to flirt with him,"

"Don't talk nonsense, and don't call the man by that doggy name. It sounds just as if you were speaking of a poodle. Love, indeed, and the man hasn't a penny. I never heard of such rubbish. However, I put you on your honour not to risk breaking the engagement by arousing Mr. Hurst's jealousy."

"I don't think he is capable of feeling jealous," retorted Sylvia bitterly; "and as to my honour, can't we leave that out, seeing you are forcing me to marry a man I don't care for, and who does not care for me. He only wants me to sit at the head of his table, to receive his visitors, and be a mere cypher in his house."

"I won't be a cypher, whatever you may be," promised her mother grimly. "And you know quite well that if you don't marry him we are ruined."

"I have given you my promise to marry him, mother."

"That's right, darling. Kiss me." Sylvia did so, coldly. "I know I can trust you to keep that Smith man in his place. If you don't, and the Squire gets jealous, then there is nothing but the Bankruptcy Court. Remember!"

Lady Gibson said the last word in quite a Charles the First way and fluttered out of the house into the waiting motor-car. Sylvia heaved a sigh of relief when it disappeared down the avenue, and was thankful to think that she had seen the last of her imperious parent for seven days. But that the breaking of the engagement meant absolute ruin, brought on by Lady Gibson's extravagance, Sylvia would never have consented to obey her mother's instructions. But, after all, a mother is a mother, and little as the girl respected her scheming parent, still, enough love was in her heart to make her sacrifice herself to save her from financial disgrace.

But it was a very hard position for Sylvia, and she disliked having to act the part of Iphigenia in so sordid a manner.

Melicent, who did not like the late visitor, was delighted to hear of her departure, and frankly told Sylvia so. She was very fond of Sylvia, and therefore was willing to accept her as a stepmother, although she could not understand how the girl could bring herself to marry the Squire, especially when a handsome young man like Toby Smith was eager to become her husband. Still, Melicent was shrewd enough to see that Sylvia was dominated by her mother, and was fighting against the feelings of her heart. Knowing this, and knowing also that the love of her father for the girl was simply a mild, diplomatic weakness to secure a handsome show-wife—as Melicent put it—she daringly proposed that Sylvia should pay a visit to the doctor.

“When the cat’s away the mice can play,” said Melicent gaily. “If you’ll excuse me talking about mice in connection with your mother. I mean cats, of course. Cats! Cats!”

“You talk so much and think so little, Melicent, that I don’t believe you know what you do mean.”

“I mean to pay a visit one evening to Miles and take you with me to see Toby,” said Melicent coolly. “It’s dull work being shut up in this big house with no one to talk to but Uncle Ralph.”

“But I like your uncle,” protested Sylvia. “He is agreeable and amusing.”

“Old, all the same, just like father. Miles and Toby are much nicer. Youth draws to youth, and although I don’t mind your being my mother, Sylvia——”

“Yes! Yes! I know what you’re going to say,” interrupted the other girl hastily; “but you don’t know all.”

"I know that you're being forced into this marriage, and I don't think that I am disloyal to my father in saying that. It would be different if father really worshipped you; but he doesn't. You're handsome, and will suit him as the mistress of the Hall. But it isn't real, true love, Sylvia dear."

"Real love and I have long since parted, my dear. But won't your father be annoyed if I go with you to see"—Sylvia hesitated—"Miles?"

"Toby, you mean, although father needn't know that. He needn't know anything, really," said Melicent audaciously. "I'll set Uncle Ralph to arrange things in some way. He's a dear old thing, and he'll contrive. I know that he knows you really love Toby and not father. He would like to see you married to Toby, since he knows it really wouldn't matter much to father."

Melicent spoke truer than she guessed, for Ralph was by no means in favour of the marriage. Not for Sylvia's sake so much as for his own, for he recognised that the girl was under her mother's thumb, and that when she became his brother's wife, Lady Gibson would be the real mistress of the Hall. And that meant trouble, since Lady Gibson liked her own way, and usually managed to get it. Ralph was quite comfortable as he was, and did not wish the existing state of things changed, especially as, if Sylvia refused the match at the eleventh hour, Edgar would not break his heart. And Lady Gibson, with her desire to dismiss the housekeeper, showed very plainly how she intended to upset things. Therefore Ralph encouraged Sylvia's meetings with the doctor in every possible way, and was quite willing to fall in with Melicent's plan of an evening visit to the young men. Ralph knew that Lady Gibson had forced Sylvia on the Squire, and had

cajoled him into a proposal, so he had no compunction in breaking off the marriage if he was able. And in this, as in other things, he was acting as the power behind the throne, so as to keep his brother in peace and comfort. Ralph was as strong as his brother was weak, and for years had been the real ruler of the house. He did not intend to resign his sceptre to Lady Gibson, which he would certainly be forced to do if she managed to make her too-obedient daughter Mrs. Edgar Hurst. For this reason amongst others he agreed to arrange the stolen visit.

"For it is stolen, Melicent," he protested, "on Sylvia's part, that is. For although your father doesn't mind Smith seeing her here, he certainly would object to this evening visit."

"I wouldn't suggest it if I thought that father really adored Sylvia," said Melicent thoughtfully. "But he doesn't, and I'd be glad if Toby would marry Sylvia and put an end to this ridiculous engagement."

"Think of your father's feelings," rebuked Ralph seriously.

"He hasn't got any in that way," insisted the girl positively. "If I thought so I'd be the last to encourage Toby Smith. And I don't believe that father wished to marry again in the least. That horrid Lady Gibson made him propose. There would be a row if she heard of our visit."

"She certainly will hear of it should your father get to know," said Ralph, with a shrug of his huge shoulders. "He tells her everything, and seems to think more of her than of Sylvia."

"Then why doesn't he marry her? It would be more suitable."

"Would you like Lady Gibson as a stepmother?"

"No," Melicent frowned and pouted. "I don't

like her. But the visit. Can we pay it in a way that father won't get to hear of it?"

"Oh, yes. See here." Ralph produced a slender key and gave it to his niece, "That opens the door of the postern—you know, Melicent, the door which is at the side of the house."

"Yes, I know, I know," said the girl impatiently, slipping the key into her pocket. "Of course I know the house from cellar to attic. When I open this door we go along the passage leading to the breakfast-room."

"Exactly, and thence you can get into the hall and ascend the stairs. But do so quietly, so as not to waken Mrs. Frint or your father. By going and coming in this way no one will see you and Sylvia, so your father won't know."

"Can't you sit up and let us in, Uncle Ralph? We won't be late."

"I'm going to sit with your father and, as you know, I am sleeping in the adjoining bedroom, since he is nervous owing to that woman's conduct. Also I shall go to bed early to pacify your father. When he knows that I am in bed and the house is locked up he will go to sleep quietly."

"I see!" Melicent laughed; then added anxiously, "then why should he be afraid if the house isn't locked up? There are no burglars in Grenacer."

"Your father fears lest Mam'zel Clarice should get into the house and worry him," said Ralph seriously, "and every night he has been careful to ask if everything is bolted and barred. I don't know if I should give you the postern key," said Ralph, rubbing his nose in a vexed way, "as I shall have to tell a lie if your father asks me if the house is locked up."

"I've got the key, and I intend to keep and use the key," said Melicent in a determined way; "and

as the door will be locked when we go and locked when we return I don't see that you will be telling any lie."

"Well! Well! Well! Go and enjoy yourselves. But don't be late."

"We'll be back at ten o'clock."

"Nine. I insist upon nine, for by then it will still be light."

"Very well then, Uncle Ralph. We'll return at nine. But it won't be so very light then, and it doesn't matter if it isn't light, as Miles and Toby will see us home. You're a darling, Uncle Ralph," and standing on tip-toes Melicent kissed him three times.

Three nights later, two girls slipped out by the postern door, which was on the west side of the house, set in an angle, and overshadowed by a large chestnut-tree. No one saw them, as the door was rarely used, so they danced down the avenue in the luminous twilight about seven o'clock. Sylvia felt particularly bright and uplifted, owing to the absence of her domestic tyrant and to the fact that she was going to see Toby. Hand in hand she and Melicent ran onward, opened the big gates, and slipped along in the shadow of the park wall to the house of the two bachelors. It certainly was not quite the thing for two young ladies to be out at such an hour paying such a visit, and the local Mrs. Grundy would have been shocked had she seen them. However, they were fortunate not to meet the lady in the person of any gossiping villager, and soon arrived at the gate of Darch's house, which opened on to the high road, no great distance from the end of the park wall. Melicent, holding Sylvia's hand, stole through the garden, which was the pride of Miles's heart, and looked in at the window. The blinds were up, as it was still light, and Darch was playing after-dinner

chess with his friend. They were so absorbed in the game that they did not notice the girls at the window.

"Check," cried Melicent, and tapped on the pane.

Miles arose with an exclamation of surprise as he recognised her voice, and opened the window, which happened to be a French one. Melicent walked into the room, followed by Sylvia, and then it was the doctor who exclaimed. He rose so hastily as to upset the chessboard, and went straight towards the girl with the evident intention of taking her in his arms. She looked at him warningly, shook her head, and stepped back.

"No! No! We have only come to pay you a visit because—because——"

Melicent, seeing that she hesitated, took the words out of her mouth. "Because Lady Gibson is away. She went to London to-day and will not return for a week. You might have learned that, doctor, had you come to see father to-day."

"I see the Squire as little as possible," said Smith quickly, and with a frown. "He really doesn't need much medical attention, and he doesn't care much about my coming to the Hall."

There was an awkward silence, for the presence of the Squire's daughter prevented plainer speaking. Miles was the first to open his mouth.

"Isn't it rather unconventional for you two young ladies to visit two bachelors?" he asked gaily. "What will the Squire and Lady Gibson say?"

"They won't know anything about it," retorted Melicent lightly. "We slipped out and we shall slip in, with the assistance of Uncle Ralph, who really is a darling," and she explained about the key of the friendly postern door.

Toby laughed, but looked serious. "All the same I am not sure that you should have come," he said, with a sigh.

"Oh, bother!" Melicent shrugged her shoulders. "It is so dull at the Hall, and Sylvia and I wish to be amused. Amuse us."

"Well, as you have kicked over the social traces so far as to be here, we may as well do our best," said Darch. "Melicent, you are a grown-up young lady and not a schoolgirl, remember."

For answer she ran to the piano and rattled off a ragtime song, while Toby looked at Sylvia and wondered if he dare speak plainly to her regarding the position of things. Miles saw the look, and being quite on his friend's side so far as the forced marriage with the Squire was concerned, suddenly resolved to give them a chance of speaking. After all Sylvia, who was very unhappy, as he knew, deserved some reward for having dared to pay this visit in the direct face of her mother's intentions.

"Melicent, come into the garden. I have a new flower to show you," he said, and touched the girl on the shoulder.

"I believe you love your garden and flowers more than you love me," she replied, jumping up to accept the invitation.

"You are a flower yourself, dearest," said Darch in a caressing tone, and putting his arm round her slender waist he led her through the French window and into the garden. Shortly they were deeply engaged in horticultural topics, and took no notice of the two left behind.

Smith thought that Sylvia would follow the lovers into the garden so as to avoid an awkward conversation with him. But Sylvia had come purposely to have the conversation in question, so that he might thoroughly understand why she obeyed her mother. This she explained to Toby, who listened, leaning against the mantelpiece, with downcast eyes.

"So you see," said Sylvia, in a low, rapid voice

and after a somewhat lengthy explanation, "I must marry Mr. Hurst or see my mother in the Bankruptcy Court."

"Yes, I see," the doctor sighed heavily, opening and shutting his hand. "I have known all along that you don't marry this man of your free will. I'm sure you don't love him, Sylvia."

"No," she replied listlessly. "I certainly don't. I neither love him nor hate him, for he is one of those men who don't awaken any feeling either way. I feel ashamed to marry such a man, seeing that he cares nothing for me—that is, in the way a man should care for his future wife."

"If he doesn't care, why does he want to marry you?"

"My mother managed to get him to propose, and I accepted, as she told me that my refusal meant absolute ruin. But it's horrible." Sylvia pressed her hands together vehemently. "Edgar only wants me to be the mistress of the Hall and look after things. He's not a man. If he were, he would not allow you to come to the Hall, even as his doctor, when he knows that I love you dearly."

"And you do, Sylvia," he made a step forward.

"Don't; stay where you are, Toby. What's the use of making things harder for me. Of course I love you. Doesn't my being here show that I love you. I would marry you to-morrow, poor as you are—but—my mother."

Her voice died away in a cry of pain, and Smith clenched his teeth on his lower lip to prevent himself from speaking wildly. When he did open his mouth it was to speak calmly enough, although the effort was great. "Do you owe so much to your mother, Sylvia?"

"I owe very little." She lifted her heavy eyes. "All my mother cares about is for me to

marry money. For my happiness she cares nothing."

"Then why should you sacrifice yourself?" he said eagerly.

"She is my mother, after all. Toby," she rose suddenly and spoke in louder tones, "you don't know how precarious is our position. My mother has sold everything; mortgaged everything. My father left a good sum of money and a fair amount of property, but my mother has wasted everything, and now we have only a few hundreds left, just enough to keep things going until I marry the Squire. If I married you my mother would have to go to the workhouse. She has tired out her friends. No one will do anything for her. I hate selling myself, but oh, my dear, what can I do? If you were only rich and could help my mother."

"I wish I were, but I am not. Sylvia, I would give my life to call you wife and break this wicked engagement. But I am as poor as a church-mouse. Still, if you marry me, we could go to the Colonies, and I'm sure I could soon make money there."

"But my mother?"

"Ah! that's the stumbling block."

The two poor things looked piteously at one another, but felt themselves too ringed round by circumstances to make any change for the better. And at the moment the voices of Miles and Melicent were heard nearer, so they were evidently returning. The unhappy lovers could not speak confidentially any longer, and indeed there was nothing left to say. Smith felt inclined to draw Sylvia to his breast and urge her to dare the worst; but he could not bring himself to do so, seeing how impossible was the realisation of his hopes. He and Sylvia looked at one another longingly; then, when the others returned through the French window, masked their

real feelings in unmeaning smiles. A fellow-feeling made Miles and Melicent understand what had taken place. But they could do nothing, and so also masked their real sentiments. The quartette played at being happy. They chatted and sang, conversed about Shakespeare and the musical glasses, and altogether acted their respective parts as though they were on the stage. Every one was unhappy: Sylvia and Toby because of circumstances; Miles and Melicent out of sheer sympathy.

At last the slow hours of make-believe came to an end, and shortly before nine o'clock the young men escorted their guests home. It was still tolerably light, so, to avoid curious glances, they walked along the riverside. Here the party, following the curve of the stream wound deviously until it passed through a thick wood, which grew round the walls of the Sanctuary and concealed the same from the roadway. On the land side the trees were dense and dark; on the river side few and scattered. Between their trunks could be seen the gleam of the river and the flat corn-lands beyond. Melicent commented on the grove, which hid the walls of the Sanctuary.

"It is because of this wood that the Hall is called Thorswud," she said carelessly. "Uncle Ralph says that the god Thor was worshipped here once."

"The god of Force," commented Toby bitterly. "He is still worshipped here, I think, Melicent," and he looked at Sylvia, who was being forced into a disagreeable marriage by her scheming mother.

After passing through the wood the party emerged on to the high road, which ran along beside the park wall. They kept in the shadow of this to avoid any passers-by; but there was no need to do so, as they found when they slipped into the gates of Thorswud for they met no one. As it was just on nine o'clock

they ran hastily up the avenue, turned the corner of the house, and came to the postern set in the angle of the building. Owing to the shadow of the chestnut-tree, it was so dark here that Melicent could not find the keyhole. Fortunately, Miles had brought his electric torch and was able to illuminate the precise place where the key should be slipped in. Melicent thrust it in and turned it to open the door. But before she could push back the door a dark figure dropped from the chestnut branches on to her and she fell to the ground with a cry. Taken by surprise the two men halted for a moment and did nothing, while Sylvia shrieked. Then they ran forward, only to find that it was too late. The dark figure arose from the ground, fumbled for a moment at the door, and then sprang away. It was the figure of a man, and he escaped as if by a miracle. Melicent rose and clutched at the door.

"Oh," she cried in horror, "stop him! stop him! He's taken the key."

CHAPTER VII.

AN EXPLANATION.

MELICENT awoke with a confused sense of what had taken place on the previous night.

After turning over three times, rubbing her eyes, stretching and yawning, her brain began to work, and she lay quiet, turning over matters in her mind. Her shoulders were still sore from the weight of the person who had dropped so unexpectedly upon them from the tree. That person had been no light weight, and the concussion, together with the subsequent fall, had shaken the girl a great deal. But who the person was, and why he should have been hiding in the chestnut-tree to drop upon her, and then run off with the key, she could not imagine. All she did know was that the assault had taken place, and that the key of the postern had been stolen. The reason why such things should happen was as yet a mystery.

And the worst of it was that the Squire had come to know all about the matter of the secret visit to Dr. Smith's house. Almost as soon as the young men had set off in pursuit of the mysterious thief, and while she and Sylvia were yet clinging together in sheer fright, Uncle Ralph had appeared at the door. Luckily she had opened the door before the

theft of the key, else her uncle himself could not have opened the door, for there was only one key—the key he had lent her. It was a surprise to see Uncle Ralph appear so unexpectedly, as both she and Sylvia believed that he was sound asleep in the room next to that of the Squire. Uncle Ralph's hasty explanation that he had lain awake waiting for their return and had heard the cry for help, fell on deaf ears, for Melicent remembered that both she and her friend had been too confused to pay much attention. When they went upstairs the Squire had come from his bedroom to learn what the noise was about, and Uncle Ralph had been forced to explain. Then she and Sylvia retired to bed in tears and in disgrace. It had been a most unpleasant end to a none-too-pleasant evening. As to what became of Miles and the doctor, Melicent could not think. But she would hear all about it soon, and rose reluctantly, with the expectation of having a disagreeable morning. For if Uncle Ralph was not angry her father assuredly was.

After her bath and the brushing of her hair, and the agreeable work of dressing herself in a delightful summer frock, Melicent went off to see how Sylvia was feeling. She found her friend up and dressed also; but, contrary to Miss Hurst's expectations, she did not look in the least downcast. As a matter of fact, her usually grave face was wreathed in smiles. Melicent stopped short at the door in sheer amazement at the sight.

"Aren't you afraid, Sylvia?" she asked, in a tone of awe. "There's sure to be a row, you know."

"My dear, I have been so often in trouble with my mother that this row does not worry me in the least. Moreover," Sylvia's face brightened still more, "perhaps your father will refuse to marry me

because of our escapade, and if he does mother can't blame me."

"She will though," said Melicent positively. She knew the lady's temper.

"Well, I don't care," said Sylvia recklessly. "I may as well be hanged for a sheep as for a lamb; and, after all, I really don't want to marry your father."

"I often wonder why you accepted him," said Melicent, as they went downstairs, "for you never told me the reason."

"I thought my mother might have given you a hint," remarked Miss Gibson dryly. "Your father is rich; my mother is poor, and I was forced to be the sacrifice."

"Oh," Melicent was shocked at this crude way of putting things; "and I thought you loved Toby."

"So I do. My going to see him last night and risking trouble is a proof how much I love him. I never thought that your father would find out about it; but as he has done so I'm ready for the worst."

"Father was very angry last night."

"I don't wonder, poor man, being awakened by your shrieks and mine," said Sylvia flippantly.

"I couldn't help shrieking when that horrid man dropped on me."

"Of course you couldn't, and I shrieked to keep you company. Anyhow, our cries awoke your father and—well, you know what took place. But," added Miss Gibson slowly, "if your father says anything more to me this morning I shall soon show him I'm not a schoolgirl to be trampled upon."

"I'm not either," declared Melicent valiantly. "After all, we didn't do any harm, and Uncle Ralph will stand by us."

In this reckless frame of mind the culprits marched into the dining-room, where Ralph was already at breakfast. His eyes twinkled when he saw their impenitent faces, but he refused to say much about the matter until they had eaten a good breakfast. All he did tell them was that the young men had not succeeded in catching the thief, and had returned to make a brief explanation and be dismissed.

"Did father see them?" asked Melicent anxiously.

"No; he was so angry that I thought it best to see them and dismiss them myself. And, strange to say, the excitement has done your father good. He is coming downstairs at midday. Of course, as I said, your father does not approve of your visit to those young men, and I got a severe wiggling for aiding and abetting you."

"I don't think much of father's wiggings. I never did," said Melicent, with a shrug, "and I hope he's got over his temper."

"I hope he has," said Sylvia emphatically. "I'm not going to marry a man with a temper."

"Oh, he won't say much to you. Melicent will act as your whipping girl."

"I shan't allow that," said Miss Gibson, drawing herself up and looking very handsome. "If any one is to be blamed I am the person."

"Well, well, well," said Ralph, in a comforting tone, "perhaps no one will be blamed. I think my brother has exhausted his rage."

"I don't care if he has or has not," said Sylvia sharply. "I'm not married to him yet, you know, Mr. Ralph."

The younger Hurst looked at her curiously, admiring the colour in her face and the temper she showed. Hitherto he had always seen Sylvia meekly bending to her mother's will, too haughty and too

indifferent to display her feelings. Now he beheld her in a new light, and recognised that she had a fine strong spirit of her own. Opposed as he was to the marriage, Ralph thought what a lucky fellow his brother was to get such a handsome girl for a wife. Sylvia met his eyes, resented the look of admiration in them, and resumed her breakfast with a look of anger on her usually expressionless face.

"Who stole the key, Uncle Ralph, and why was it stolen?" asked Melicent, who had now finished.

"I'll tell you both that in the library after breakfast. But you must promise to say nothing about the matter to your father."

"But he knows——"

"He knows that you were out and that some one snatched the key. But he does not know who the some one is."

"Do you?" Both girls asked the question simultaneously.

Ralph nodded in a provoking manner and strolled out of the room. So anxious were the two ladies to learn what he knew, that they were only another five minutes over their meal—that is, Sylvia was, as Melicent had finished when she asked the question concerning the key.

The library was a large, old-fashioned apartment, the walls of which apparently consisted of books, for there was no sign of the same, so hidden they were by the many volumes. There were three narrow windows looking out into the park and draped with faded red curtains; a fireplace of ruddy tiles with a mantelpiece of black oak, and one wide door leading out of the hall. The carpet was crimson, and in the middle of the vast apartment stood a large table covered with red cloth and piled with

papers. The rest of the furniture consisted of comfortable leather arm-chairs to the number of five or six. Into one of these Melicent dropped, while Sylvia placed herself in another. As for Ralph, he remained seated at the table, where he had been when they entered.

"Now give us the explanation, Uncle Ralph," said his niece, who was consumed with a curiosity manifestly shared by Miss Gibson.

Ralph drew his hand out of his pocket, and with it a slender key. "This is the explanation," he said, with a bland smile.

"The key. Did you get it? How did you get it? Who stole it? Why was it stolen? Who got it back again? Miles? Toby?"

The questions from the two poured so thickly and quickly that Ralph raised his hands to his ears.

"Wait! Wait! and hold your tongues. You are nearest to the fireplace, Melicent. Ring the bell and see who comes in."

Wondering at this order the girl did so, and looked in the direction of the door. It opened suddenly and Jum shot in with his usual rapidity. He grinned when he saw the young ladies, and then stood stiff as a ramrod looking at Ralph. That gentleman had sat down again and now waved his hand.

"Tell Miss Hurst and Miss Gibson what you told me, Jum, and explain how you were in a position to get the information. Use your best English and mind you speak slowly."

"Oh, go on, Jum, go on," cried Melicent impatiently. "How did you——"

"Let the boy speak, Melicent," interrupted her uncle, and the boy did speak.

"Mr. Ralph told me to watch Mam'zel Clarice after she made an assault on Master," said Jum,

choosing his words carefully. "He thought she might try it on again. So, ever since, I've been looking after her day and night, so as to see what she was doing."

"And what was she doing?" asked Sylvia, curiously.

"Watching this house, miss."

"What for?"

"I can't tell you that, miss; but she has always been prowling about the place, mostly when the twilight came. After your lady-mother came to see her, miss, she came out, and was walking round and round."

"Trying to get in?" asked Melicent suddenly.

Jum bowed gravely. "Yes, miss, I think so. But every time she tried she never did, though she looked at all the windows and doors. And last night, miss, Mr. Ralph told me to follow you and Miss Gibson, so that Mam'zel should not harm you. That——"

"Oh, how ridiculous," interrupted Sylvia. "Why should she wish to harm us?"

"My dear Miss Gibson," said Ralph seriously, "one is never safe with a woman of that kind, and as she wishes to marry my brother she is naturally your enemy."

Sylvia shivered. "I never thought of that. You are right. Go on, Jum."

"Well, I followed, miss," continued Jum, "and soon saw that Mam'zel was following also."

"But how did she know that we were going to Dr. Smith's?" questioned Melicent excitedly.

"She was always watching, miss, and somehow got to know."

"Melicent," said her uncle at this moment, "do you remember how Mam'zel became calm on the day I carried her out, when I whispered in her ear?"

" Yes, uncle ; I wondered what the spell was."

" This. When Mam'zel came to Grenacer I made myself acquainted with her life in Paris. I learned that she had been in the secret service of the police there, and whispered that I would tell your father her profession if she did not go quietly. You saw how she obeyed, and knowing this you can easily guess that such a clever woman would easily be able to learn about your doings and know how to follow you. Go on, Jum. Melicent, you can express your surprise later."

Thus warned Melicent held her peace, and Jum, feeling the importance of his position, continued gravely : " Mam'zel followed you and Miss Gibson, miss. I followed her, and you spoke so loud, miss, that I heard what you were saying. And so," added the boy significantly, " did Mam'zel Clarice."

" What did I say, Jum ?" Melicent look startled, for although she knew that whatever she said would be innocent enough it was not a pleasant thought that her conversation had been overheard by so dangerous a woman as Miss Brown.

" You said how lucky it was that you had the key of the postern door, and a lot else, miss. But Mam'zel, as I guessed, only paid attention to that."

" But why should she ? "

" Can't you see, Melicent ? " said Ralph, rather impatiently. " Didn't Jum tell you that she was prowling about the house to get another chance of speaking to your father and could find no entrance. Of course when your incautious conversation gave her information about the key she made up her mind to get it."

" Oh," cried Sylvia, suddenly enlightened, " then it was——"

"Wait ! Wait ! One thing at a time. Continue, Jum."

As gravely as ever the boy went on speaking :

"Mam'zel followed the young ladies to the doctor's house, and then went home to her own. I followed her, as Mr. Ralph had told me to watch her closely. After a long time, while I hid in the garden, she came out dressed as a boy."

"Oh !" said the girls simultaneously. Then Melicent said, breathlessly indignant : "How dare she ?" and her uncle answered :

"A woman who has been in the Paris secret police will dare a great deal to gain her ends, and is well furnished with cunning experience of how to gain them. She came out in a kind of close-fitting bicycle suit, I fancy."

"She did, sir," said Jum solemnly. "And then she made for the park, slipped in through the big gate and ran up the avenue. I followed, just in time to see her climb into that chestnut-tree near the postern."

"I see ; I see," cried Melicent excitedly. "She waited there until we returned home, and then dropped on my shoulders"—she rubbed one ruefully—"so as to snatch the key."

"Exactly," said her uncle calmly.

"And remember, Melicent, Miles flashed his torch on to the keyhole so that you could slip in the key. The woman saw plainly where it was," said Sylvia.

Melicent nodded. "She stole it cleverly enough. What I want to know is how Uncle Ralph got it back."

"Hearken to Jum," advised Ralph grimly.

"I was round the corner," said the page modestly, "and heard you cry out, Miss Melicent. When Mam'zel got the key—and I guessed she was after

that—she made off. I followed, and managed to catch up with her. Somehow I tripped her up, and said I'd hold her until the doctor and Mr. Darch came up unless she gave me the key. I suppose she was afraid of being caught, for she threw it at me. While I was picking it up she ran away as hard as she could. I found the key and slipped in amongst the trees beside the avenue. When the doctor and Mr. Darch passed me I came back to the postern and found Mr. Ralph waiting. I gave him the key and——"

"Why didn't you wait and tell Mr. Darch?" interrupted Melicent impatiently.

"I think Jum was wise not to do so. Had he told Miles that he had recovered the key and knew the name of the thief Miles, in his excitement, might have told your father."

"But I want Miles to know the truth now, uncle."

"He can, for now he is less excited, and I can explain to him that I don't wish my brother to learn the truth. If he did he would have no rest."

"But everything is safe now, since you have the key back," said Sylvia; "the woman can't get in."

"True enough; but until she goes she will try to get in, and that fact alone is sufficient to throw my brother into a nervous fever. If you remember, all I explained last night to my brother, to account for the noise, was that you and Melicent had been frightened by a tramp when returning from your visit to the doctor. Keep to that story, Miss Gibson, and never let on that Mam'zel Clarice has anything to do with the matter. Jum, you can go. I am very pleased with you, my lad."

"And so are we," said Sylvia and Melicent.

Jum retired, blushing with pleasure all over his freckled face, and indeed he deserved their praise, for few boys of his tender age would have acted so cleverly and with such circumspection. He opened the door to depart, and as he did so the Squire stepped into the library. He looked much better, but still seemed listless and bored. With a nod to his brother and a frown at his daughter he spoke coldly to Sylvia.

"Will you come to my study?" he asked, with chill politeness. "I wish to speak to you."

"Father, it's all my fault." Melicent jumped up and ran forward.

The Squire put her aside without a word. "I ask if Sylvia will come to my study?" he said again, and still coldly.

"Certainly!" said Miss Gibson, throwing back her head in a haughty manner and leaving the room calmly. She knew that she was in for a bad quarter of an hour, but knew also that she was quite able to hold her own with this dapper manikin who was to be her future husband—that is, if the interview passed off successfully, which, so far as she could see, was unlikely.

When in the study, Mr. Hurst placed a chair for Sylvia and sat down at his desk in a magisterial manner. The girl faced him quietly, again resuming her mask of statuesque repose and uninviting silence. This demeanour disconcerted the Squire, who had hoped for tears and apologies. But Lady Gibson was not there to coerce her daughter, and lacking so capable an ally Hurst had to face the situation—and one of his own creation—alone. He did so with manifest reluctance, since the blood ran too thinly in his veins to stimulate his courage to real manly indignation.

"I am very much annoyed, Sylvia," he said, after

a pause, "to hear from my brother that you visited Dr. Smith's house last night."

"You never told me that you objected to my speaking to him," she said coldly.

"Not here. But in his house—that is quite a different thing."

"How so, Mr. Hurst?"

"I think you might call me Edgar seeing that you are engaged to me."

"How so, Edgar?" asked Sylvia obediently, for the point was not worth arguing, and it was useless to irritate the weak little man.

"Can you ask? Your mother told me that you were flirting with that young doctor. As I am not of a jealous disposition I made no sign of displeasure, and even allowed young Smith to attend me when I was ill, knowing that you would meet him. You must admit that I am no tyrant."

"Oh, certainly, I admit that."

"But to go to his house in the evening was improper."

"I can't see it. I might shelter myself behind Melicent and say that I accompanied her to see Miles, but I shan't do that. I went because I wished to go, and because it was necessary to see Dr. Smith."

"Why was it necessary?" asked the Squire, in his fretful fashion.

"Because I love him, and had to explain that I could not marry him, since my mother wishes me to marry you. Owing to my mother's presence here I had no chance of a private conversation in this house. So when she went and Dr. Smith did not come I thought it best to pay the visit you speak of. But for the trouble last night you would not have known anything about the matter and, as you know, 'Where ignorance is bliss.'"

"Ah, the tramp! Well, it serves you and Melicent right in being frightened by that tramp, whosoever he is. You acted wrongly."

"I acted rightly." Sylvia spoke haughtily.

"You are engaged to me."

"By my mother's desire," she reminded him coolly.

"Not by your own?"

Sylvia stood up indignantly. "I don't see why you need ask that question, Mr. Hurst. You know well enough that I do not love you and that I love Toby—I mean Dr. Smith. You want me as your wife and, for my mother's sake, since she is poor, I have sold myself."

"You put matters plainly," snapped the Squire, biting his lips.

"It is necessary to speak plainly," was the haughty reply. "And now that I have done so, will you cancel our engagement and give me back my word?"

"What about your mother?" asked Hurst, fencing. "You know what this marriage means to her. I understand her position thoroughly, and I am willing to help her if you marry me."

"Do you call yourself a man to accept me as your wife on those terms?" demanded Sylvia scornfully.

"It suits my purpose to have you as my wife," said Hurst obstinately, and unmoved by her scorn; "and my wife you shall be. I don't demand love from you, but I do demand respect."

"Respect?"

"Yes; you must stop speaking to this young man, and you must promise me never to pay him another visit."

"I promise," said Sylvia coldly. "I have told him all I had to tell him. He understands the situation as well as you do."

“Very good. The Squire rose, and appeared to be relieved. “Then things can remain as they are.”

“For my mother’s sake, I suppose they must. But one change in the existing state of things I shall make.”

“And that is ? ”

“I shall go up to town to my mother to-day.”

“Oh, go by all means,” retorted the Squire ; “but remember you return as my wife.”

CHAPTER VIII.

THE CURSE OF HECATE.

SYLVIA lost no time in departing. She had failed to move the Squire in any way, since he was evidently more determined than ever to make her his unloved wife. She felt, however, that she had reached the bounds of her endurance and could not stay under the same roof with him ; at all events, for the time being. Certainly, when she became Mrs. Hurst, she would be obliged to live always under the same roof, but Sylvia hoped that some miracle would occur to prevent the wedding taking place. Hurst's mere presence made her shudder. He was as cold-blooded as a fish, and was buying her just as he might have bought a chair or a table to furnish his house. He understood thoroughly that she did not love him and wished to marry Toby ; yet in the face of her plainly-expressed scorn, he held to his bargain. The amazing thing was that a girl like Melicent should have such a father. He had no honour, no feelings, no chivalry, no sympathy.

And yet Sylvia saw that she would be obliged to marry him. When she was his wife her mother would be helped and placed above all financial troubles for the rest of her frivolous life. If she refused to marry, then there was nothing but ruin

for her mother and for herself. Sylvia cared very little for ruin, so far as she personally was concerned. She was young, she was thoroughly well educated, and in one way or another would be able to earn her own living. Failing all else, she could marry Toby and share his poverty, helping him, as his wife, to improve his circumstances as she best could. But her mother could not be helped by Toby, who was so desperately poor, and what was to become of her? On her way to town Sylvia racked her brain for some solution of the painful problem, but could find none. There seemed to be no help for it. She would have to marry Hurst and sacrifice her young life for the sake of a selfish parent who thought only of herself and her pleasures. There was something monstrous that such a sacrifice of one human being to the selfishness of another should be demanded. But, after all, a mother is a mother, and the sacrifice had to be made. It was the relationship which so complicated matters.

Melicent received a weak scolding from her father, who was more querulous than angry. She took all the blame upon herself, and protested against being condemned as if she had done something wrong. She was engaged to Miles, she argued, so why shouldn't she see Miles on all and every occasion. Besides, she had received the approval of her uncle and the help of her uncle. And, after all, no one had seen her or Sylvia either coming or going.

"You are making a mountain out of a molehill, father," said Melicent.

"Well, it's not to happen again," said her parent, weakly cross. "It didn't matter so much about you going, but you had no business to take Sylvia."

"I couldn't go alone. I had to chaperone Sylvia."

"Your future mother."

"Stepmother, father, though I doubt if she ever will be. Sylvia is a dear girl, and if she will make you happy I shall be glad to see you married to her. But you don't seem to care much for her, father."

"She suits me as a wife," said the Squire doggedly.

"You haven't experienced what she'll be as a wife yet, father. And, anyhow, she loves Toby Smith and doesn't love you."

"I know all about that. Love doesn't enter into the matter."

"Why not?" Melicent opened her eyes widely.

"I thought that love was necessary for a happy marriage."

"Not in this case. Sylvia and I will be perfectly happy as soon as she recognises what is due to me, and that is respect."

"Were you ever in love, father?" asked the girl, mystified.

"I liked your mother," he replied evasively.

"Liking isn't love."

"And asking questions isn't politeness," cried Hurst, exploding in a kind of weak rage. "Go away, Melicent, and don't you lead Sylvia astray any more."

Melicent did go away. She could not understand her father. As with Sylvia, the parental relationship complicated matters. Her father *was* her father, and had to be regarded as such; but there was no true bond of feeling between them other than the mere flesh and blood one. The girl was young, very warm-hearted and ardent, liking and disliking thoroughly with all her feelings, so she could not respect the half-hearted manner in which the Squire behaved. He was polite, polished, even gallant, but there was no depth in him, and he was incapable of decided action, right or wrong. After Sylvia's departure, and when Miles came one day to the Hall,

she asked his opinion. All the young man could do was to quote Toby as a medical authority.

"He says that your father is suffering from a want of blood. His heart is weak ; his blood is thin ; he lacks vitality. All the flesh and blood strength of the family is stored up in your uncle."

"I am strong enough," said Melicent, resenting this statement.

"I allude to the last generation, of course. Don't be too hard on your poor father, dear. He can't help being born a weakling."

"He is not a weakling in some things, Miles. For instance, he will insist upon marrying Sylvia, although he knows that he will make her miserable."

"Your father hasn't enough imagination to conceive that and, moreover, like all weak people, is intensely selfish and obstinate, if you will pardon my saying so."

"Oh, yes," replied the girl vaguely. "I brought your very frank explanation upon myself."

No more was said at the time, as Miles felt some delicacy in continuing the subject introduced by the daughter of the man who was being discussed. But Melicent felt that what Toby Smith said was true ; her father was a weakling, and if he lived to the age of Old Parr would be nothing else. It was a painful thought to a girl, who loved a man to be a man, but there was no remedy for it that she could see. Even his second marriage, with a beautiful woman like Sylvia, would leave him where he was, flaccid and inactive. Why her father should be thus debilitated she could not imagine. It was not that the Hurst race was worn out, for there was plenty of red blood in the veins of her uncle and of herself. Both, making allowance for the difference between their ages, were eager for enjoyment. Ralph for his books, and she for life of whatever description, rural

or urban. Melicent gave up trying to understand how she came to have such a father, and accepted the fact with as much philosophy as she was capable of conceiving. After all, he was not a tyrant, and, on the whole, was fairly easy to live with.

For two or three days after Sylvia's departure things went on as usual, and nothing of importance happened. Unaware of Mam'zel's machinations, and knowing that she intended to return to Paris, the Squire fell back into his old listless ways. He dressed smartly, as usual, took his little walks in the park, played billiards with his brother after dinner, and read a little before going to bed. Melicent felt very much bored. Sylvia was absent and would not return for a fortnight, when they would come down for a few days, as Lady Gibson wrote. There was no one to talk to save Miles, and although being in love the girl found him a host in himself, she nevertheless felt she would like to see some members of her own sex. But most of the girls she knew were in town for the season. Melicent wished to go also for a few days to London, but her uncle persuaded her not to leave the Hall until Mam'zel Clarice cleared out, as he put it.

"But when will she clear out?" asked Melicent, who had sought the library in order to ask the question about going to London.

"On Friday."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive. By her trying to get that key she has placed herself within the reach of the law. I went and told her so, saying that your father would certainly prosecute her if she did not leave Grenacer."

"And she agreed?"

"She couldn't do anything else," said Ralph coolly. "I pointed out to her that I would prevent her, at all costs, from seeing your father again and

pressing her ridiculous claim. I reminded her that through Lady Gibson I had sent her one hundred pounds;—that is, your father desired it to be given to her, since he did not wish the daughter of his old tutor to be left penniless. I advised Mam'zel to go back to Paris and take up her secret service business with the French police, as the career offered many chances for the development of her spying propensities. So she is going, for Jum—I set Jum to watch her—says that she has sent her box to London."

"Why can't she take it with her?"

"Oh, she explained. You know that your father kindly gave her a motor-cycle to travel to and from Serbery for the school business. Well, Mam'zel intends to take a small bag and travel to London on the machine. I daresay she will sell it in London, secure her box, and cross the Channel. Then that will be the end of her, and a good job too."

Melicent nodded. "She would certainly make trouble if she stayed. But when can I go to London, Uncle Ralph?"

"Why not ask your father?"

"Oh, you know what father is. He never wants me to go away. But he always does what you advise, so——" Melicent waited in eloquent silence.

Ralph laughed whole-heartedly. "I see. Well, I am going to London on Friday myself to see Lady Gibson and Sylvia on your father's behalf."

"Why?"

"Oh, your father wants Lady Gibson to understand that Sylvia's escapade makes no difference to his feelings towards her. You know that, as Sylvia does not wish to marry your father, she may have told some cock-and-bull story in order to break off the match."

"I wish it was broken off," said Melicent angrily. "I think it's a shame for Sylvia to be forced into

marriage with father, who is much too old for her, and who doesn't really care for her. Besides, she loves Toby."

"Precisely; and that's why I am going up to make it clear that your father is of the same mind. I'll ask Lady Gibson if you can go and stay with her for a week, and will persuade your father to let you go."

"Thank you, uncle. I don't like Lady Gibson, but I love Sylvia, and if you can get father to give me plenty of money we can go shopping."

"That can easily be arranged. But you understand, Melicent, that I go up on Friday morning. Mam'zel, I believe, goes on Friday evening. I travel by train, and she on her motor-cycle. So if she tries to get in and see your father after I go, and before she goes, mind you prevent her."

"Yes; I'll get Miles to come here for the evening. He can deal with her."

"I hope so," said Ralph gloomily; "but Mam'zel Clarice is a clever woman and a dangerous woman. I shan't feel safe about your father until she is in Paris. She might try to stick him again as she tried before."

"Oh, she was only in a rage," laughed Melicent, with the easy confidence of youth. "She won't make such a fool of herself again."

"Let us hope she won't. Anyhow, you are wise to get Miles to come and see you on Friday evening. He will be able to arrange things should there be trouble of any kind."

Melicent did not think that there would be trouble, and thought that her uncle was making a great fuss about nothing. However, she asked Miles to come to dinner on Friday, and suggested that he should stay until nine o'clock at least, since Mam'zel—as Jum learned from the landlady who had seen better days—intended to start for London about eight

o'clock. Once the adventuress was out of the place Melicent felt that she could breathe freely, for, in spite of her nonchalance when speaking to her uncle, she was a trifle afraid. The hand of Hecate, as she remembered, had closed and was still closed. If the legend was to be believed (and the girl thoroughly did believe it), misfortune would come to the Hursts. And, so far, trouble certainly had come, though not actual misfortune. But a cloud in a blue sky may change from white to grey, and the grey can change swiftly from that to black, bringing thunder and lightning, devastation and wreckage. So there was yet time for disaster to happen. Melicent said so in the drawing-room to Miles after dinner, and shivered with apprehension as she spoke. She would not have made the remark had her father been present, since she did not wish to rack his nerves. But he had retired to his study to read the evening papers, which had just arrived, and she was alone with Miles in the drawing-room. Ralph had gone to London by the morning train, and Mam'zel—ah, where was Mam'zel? "I wish Jum would come and tell us she has gone," said Melicent anxiously; "for while she remains in Grenacer I feel sure that—as I said, Miles—there is time for disaster to happen."

"Oh, that statue has got on your nerves," said the barrister, trying to laugh the girl out of her fears, "and it's all nonsense anyhow."

"Well, you must admit that only since the hand of Hecate closed has trouble come to this house."

"It came with Mam'zel Clarice and it will go with her. It's half-past eight now," added Miles, glancing at his watch. "Jum will be here soon."

As he spoke there came a sharp knock at the door, and the boy entered with the welcome information that Miss Brown had taken her departure. "She

went off on her cycle, with a small bag, and dressed as a boy," explained Jum.

"In which direction did she go—to Serbery?"

"No, miss; she went along the Brant road."

"Brant is only four miles away," said Melicent.

"I expect she is going to catch the train there to London."

"No; remember your uncle told us that she was riding to London. The Brant road is a better one than the Serbery one, as there are not so many turnings."

"I see." Melicent drew a breath of relief. "Thank you, Jum. You can go now. You are sure that Mam'zel really has gone?"

"Quite sure, miss. I saw her slipping along the Brant road in the twilight as hard as she could," and with a pleased grin he vanished rapidly, after his usual meteoric fashion.

"Now, are you satisfied?" said Darch, taking Melicent in his arms.

"Yes! Yes! Yes!" She broke away and began to dance about the room. "I feel quite happy and merry and gay. Oh, what a relief, Miles!"

"And the closed hand?"

"Perhaps it will open again to-morrow. After all, we've had a lot of bother about Mam'zel and her visits, so perhaps Hecate will relent and let the Hursts off further trouble."

"Melicent, you are silly to connect this woman's doings with that confounded statue. If I had my way I'd melt it down."

"I'd never let you do that seeing how much it has to do with the luck of the family," said Melicent sharply. "Of course when we marry you'll be master here when we inherit the property; but you mustn't meddle with Hecate."

"Well, I won't, darling. As to coming here, we

never may come. If your father marries again, he may have a son and heir."

"Oh, well," cried the girl gaily, and full of joy now that the shadow of Mam'zel Clarice had passed away. "I don't care. We can live on your five hundred a year, and I can learn to sew and cook and bake and boil."

"I don't think you'll need to do that," said the barrister gravely. "See here, Melicent, I intend to chuck my idea of a rural life and to go in seriously for my profession."

"That's a new idea," Melicent raised her eyebrows.

"It's Jum's idea, though he doesn't know it. When I see that lad so anxious to get on and working so hard to take advantage of his opportunities, I feel a slacker; and a slacker, Melicent, isn't worthy of you."

"Oh, you're not so bad as that, Miles," she faltered, looking down.

"Yes, I am," he answered almost fiercely. "That lad, with his perseverance, has taught me a lesson, although he doesn't know it. Think of how he spoke when he came here a year ago, and think how he speaks now. It's wonderful. No, Melicent, the time is past for rural bliss and lazy pleasures."

"You work hard enough in your garden, Miles."

"I'll work harder at my profession, and," he caught her to him fondly, "for your sake, my dear little girl."

Melicent buried her face in his breast. "I'm glad, I'm glad," she said softly. "I really do wish you to work and become great. I have an idle father with no ambitions, and I want a hard-working husband with many."

"Let us limit the ambition to one thing—the woolsack," said Darch with a laugh, but very much in earnest. "And now you understand my

programme and Mam'zel has gone for ever, I shall go. It's nine o'clock."

"Say good-night to father," urged the girl, and with a nod he consented.

The Squire was comfortably seated in his study, with the door open, on account of the heat. He had laid aside his newspaper and was reading a novel. Beside him, on a small table, stood the lamp, and in the dim twilight outside could be seen the menacing figure of Hecate, with her clenched hand ominously upraised. Melicent shivered at the sight, which recalled her many fears, but now that the cause of such fears, in the person of Mam'zel Clarice, was gone she laughed at herself for her folly. Laying her hand on the Squire's shoulder, she told him that they had both come to say good night.

"It's early yet," said Hurst, laying aside his book reluctantly. "I don't intend to go to bed myself until midnight."

"Oh, father, when you have been so sick."

"I wasn't sick, only worried by that confounded woman with her whims. However, she has gone. Ralph arranged that, so I feel quite well and don't intend to worry about her any more. Won't you stay for a glass of wine?" he asked the young man.

"No; I wish to get home. Besides, Melicent is tired and intends to go to bed straight away."

"Ah, and I'm no company for you when Melicent is away. That's love, I suppose, Miles. Queer thing. I've never been in love myself. Well, good night, good night. Kiss me, Melicent. I shall stay here and read this book. Send Frint to me with a brandy and soda."

The young people took their leave and Melicent saw Miles to the door to kiss and dismiss him. It was a hot night, and the mists were rising in the park, which looked gloomy with its dense foliage

under the starry sky. There was no moon and no wind either, which Miles regretted, as he felt very warm indeed. With Melicent's farewell kiss on his lips, he strode down the dark avenue and left her standing at the door. So long did she stand that Mrs. Frint found her there.

"Bless me, miss, you'll take a chill," said the bustling housekeeper. "Do come in and let me bolt the door. I've taken your pa his nightcap, and I'm going to bed. He won't want anything more to-night."

"You're going to bed early, Frint," said Melicent, while the housekeeper bolted and barred the great door.

"And so's every mortal soul in this house, my dear," she replied with a sigh, "for we're all wore out considerable with the heat. Good night, miss, and if you can spare a kiss which Mr. Miles don't want——"

Melicent, who was very fond of the voluble, vulgar old woman, kissed her heartily and then ran up the shallow oak stairs to her bedroom. It was in the east wing of the house, far away from the front and from the Sanctuary. Melicent was always glad of this, as she disliked the Sanctuary, with its gloomy funereal trees and grim black image. But, on the whole, she felt very happy on this night, and tried to put the statue out of her head. Mam'zel was gone, her father was better in health, and Miles had expressed his intention of doing justice to his mental powers. Putting aside the miserable affair of Sylvia and the forced marriage, which was always disagreeable, there was nothing to worry about. Hecate might have exhausted the contents of her closed hand in the various petty worries of the last week or so. Only in one way could Melicent see any future trouble coming.

" Sylvia's marriage," she murmured to herself, as she tumbled into bed, feeling unusually heavy and drowsy. " If father marries her and she grows tired she may clope with Toby. But I shan't trouble about that. I shan't trouble." Here her thoughts grew confused and shortly she was sound asleep, like the healthy young animal she was.

As a rule, Melicent slept too deeply to dream. But on this night she did dream a great deal. Nor were the dreams pleasant. Somehow the statue had come to life and was stalking after her grimly down a long road bordered by cypress trees. Her hand was still clenched, and she wished to show Melicent what was in it. But the girl in her dream was overcome with fear, and fled for miles, through many years, as it seemed, in her efforts to escape the evil image. Finally Hecate caught her, laid a heavy arm on her shoulder and opened the closed hand directly under her eyes. What she saw there the girl could not remember when she awoke, for at that moment she did awake. And in a terrible fright, too, for something horrible was disclosed by the opening of the hand. With a cry Melicent sat up in bed, streaming with perspiration and shaking in every limb. She was thankful to see that the dawn of day had come, for if she had awakened in the dark, with that terrible dream as vivid in her brain as it now was, she would have been scared to death. Sitting up, she leaned her head on her hands and tried to think what was the object revealed by the open hand. Suddenly, when it was quite light, there was a cry and a rush, and Mrs. Frint swept into the room, haggard and tearful.

" Miss, miss, your pa is dead. Your pa has been murdered."

Melicent stared at her quite dazed. " It's the curse of Hecate," she muttered stupidly.

CHAPTER IX.

A NINE DAYS' WONDER.

MRS FRINT wore an emerald-hued dress, adorned with yellow ribbons, and the aggressive contrast between this gay garb and her terrified looks was markedly striking. Her whole body was trembling, her legs failed to support her, and she dropped into a chair to wring her hands and weep. Melicent, not able as yet to quite understand the terrible news, stared at her in a dazed manner. The shock unsettled her thinking powers for the moment.

"The curse of Hecate," wailed Mrs. Frint, shaking like a jelly and rocking to and fro. "Is that all you can say, miss. Don't I tell you as your poor dear pa is dead with a knife in his heart."

"It's the curse of Hecate," repeated the girl, springing from the bed and becoming much more alive to the situation. "It was said that when her hand closed misfortune would come to the Hursts, and it has come. I always said it would. Father dead! Oh, it's impossible!"

Hardly aware of the contradiction conveyed by the latter part of her speech, Melicent snatched up her dressing gown, thrust her bare feet into slippers, and ran out of the room. Mrs. Frint, crying and trembling tottered after her, and arrived in the study

to find Melicent kneeling by her dead father, supporting his head in her lap. The Squire was, as the girl had seen him last, in evening dress, but his expansive shirt front was soiled with blood, where the knife had penetrated the heart. The knife itself, an ugly-looking weapon, evidently taken from the trophy over the fireplace, lay on the carpet beside the body. Melicent stared at the still white face directly under her eyes, and then raised them to see the Black Image with its raised arm and clenched fist towering menacingly in the bright morning sunshine. Two chairs were overturned and many loose papers had been swept off the table, while the book Hurst had been reading lay beneath it. One window was open and so was the door.

"Go back, go back!" cried Mrs. Frint to the scared servants, who were peering into the room. "Don't come in until I send for you. Miss Melicent you shouldn't have touched the body. It must lie as I found it until the police come. Get up, there's a dear, though a shock it's bin to you as to me, may the Lord have mercy on us both."

"Poor father," murmured the girl, whose face was pale, but with dry eyes, for she felt too horrified to weep, "to think he was alive and well when I left him last night"—she raised her head and looked at the housekeeper—"you saw him later than I did."

Mrs. Frint nodded and sobbed. "I took him in his nightcap. Brandy and soda it was, with a biscuit. He was sitting in that chair reading, and said he wouldn't want anything more. Then I went to bed: you saw me go to bed, miss, after you kissed me. Lord knows I ain't got nothing to do with the master's being as dead as a herring."

"No one suggests such a thing," said Melicent mechanically, "when did you find him dead?"

"Just after seven, and it's not eight o'clock yet," sobbed the stout woman hysterically, "I came in to dust and tidy up, for you know, miss, as your pa never let any one but me do that. He was lying there, just as you saw him, and you should have left him alone, miss."

"Was the door open?" asked Melicent, remembering that on account of the heat it had been standing wide on the previous night.

"It was, miss. I expect some one got into the house in that way and knifed him, pore dear."

"From the Sanctuary? Impossible. You know that no one can get into the Sanctuary."

"Walls can be climbed, miss. And if you'll look out, you'll see that the ladder as was used to examine the closed hand of that dratted stater is still there. Bin made use of too, I should say."

This was extremely likely, as the ladder rested against the wall to the left of the image, and any interloper could descend it with ease. But how such a person could mount the wall from the outside Melicent could not conjecture at the moment. However, it was useless to sit on the floor with the head of her dead father in her lap, since there was much to be done. No one could take charge of the situation save herself, as her uncle was away in London, and Miles was at the other end of the village. Melicent kissed the rigid white face, laid her father's head gently on the ground, and covered it with a handkerchief silently handed by Mrs. Frint. Then she rose, and forced herself to attend to matters of moment.

"Send Jum at once for Mr. Darch," she said rapidly, "and tell him to bring Dr. Smith with him also. One of the grooms can go for the policeman. Keep the servants in order until I dress, and don't lose your head. No one is to enter this room, until

Mr. Darch arrives. I'll lock the door so as to make sure that nothing is disturbed."

"You've disturbed things yourself, miss, by meddling with the body," complained Mrs. Frint, as they left the room and Melicent locked the door "but, lor, it don't matter, though it's a pity you did not leave it alone. I'll do what you say, miss. But do try and cry, deary. Tears will relieve your heart."

"I can't cry," said Melicent, sighing. "I wish I could, but I can't. Some things are too terrible for mere tears. Go and do what I tell you, Frint."

The housekeeper with a scared glance at the pale face of her young mistress gulped down her grief and hurried away, still trembling and shaken to the very core of her being. Just as Melicent was mounting the stairs in order to dress, Mrs. Frint hurried back. "Shouldn't you telegraph to Mr. Ralph, miss. He ought to know at once."

"He is returning by the midday train," replied the girl after a pause, "so he will learn the horrible truth soon enough."

"But to prepare him for the shock, miss," urged Mrs. Frint, "to get him ready as you might say, by breaking the news gently."

"Do as you like, Frint. You know the name of the hotel Uncle Ralph generally stays at. The groom who goes to bring the policeman can take the telegram."

Melicent issued the order rapidly and then ran to her room. In a wonderfully short space of time she was dressed; and put on a black frock, since death was in the house. Although not desperately fond of her father, owing to his never seeking her affection, the girl had sufficient love for him to be terribly shocked by his death. And such a death! It was heartrending to think that the quiet, harmless

little man could be struck down in this barbarous fashion by a cruel enemy. And Melicent had no doubt as to the name of that enemy. Mam'zel Clarice had undoubtedly killed the Squire. But how she could have entered the house, seeing that the key of the postern had been recovered, Melicent could not imagine. Unless—and this idea was suggested by Mrs. Frint's mention of the ladder—she had climbed over the wall of the Sanctuary, to descend the same and enter the study by the open door. So far as the girl's bewildered brain could grasp things, this was the sole conclusion she could arrive at.

And with this belief that Mam'zel Clarice had stabbed her father came her tears. The sudden announcement of Mrs. Frint had paralysed the girl, and the actual sight of the dead body had stunned her. But now that she knew the worst, and had a glimmering idea as to how the worst had been brought about, she began to cry bitterly. In many ways she recalled her father's kindness, for although he was usually weak and indifferent and wrapped up in himself, yet on the whole he had been kind. He had never grudged her any money, or any pleasure within reason, and had even taken a kind of feeble pleasure in her good looks and vivacious nature. Melicent reproached herself somewhat unnecessarily for not having appreciated him more, although he had really patiently endured her filial advances rather than accepted them. But the girl being generous and affectionate, blamed herself for neglect, and wept bitterly. It was the result of the usual parental and filial complication of two diverse natures being brought into close contact, which engendered some mysterious sympathy which could not be put into words. Hurst had always been indifferent to his daughter and Melicent had

always been chilled by that indifference. Still, the inexplicable bond of father and daughter existed, and it was this which made the girl weep for the loss of one with whom she had nothing else in common.

However, weeping was of little use, since it could not bring back the dead, so Melicent dried her eyes and went downstairs to await the coming of Miles. Hardly had she reached the drawing-room—she avoided the study in which the body lay—than Mrs. Frint announced his arrival. He brought the doctor with him, and they were both horrified by the calamity. Miles entered hurriedly, and walked across the room to take Melicent in his arms. She ran forward to throw herself into them, and Darch, while soothing her, nodded to Toby as an intimation that he had better leave the room. So Toby went and interviewed the village policeman, who also had arrived, while Miles comforted the orphan.

"Cry dearest; cry," said the young man tenderly, "it will do you good."

Melicent shook her head. "I have cried upstairs," she said woefully, "and I feel that tears won't do any good. Only—only—Miles you don't think that I neglected father."

The young man led her to the sofa, sat down and took her on his knee, to hold her weary head against his breast. "No, dear, no," he said softly, "you gave your father all the affection he wanted. Had he shown any desire you would have given him more. But a self-centred nature such as he had—but there, he is dead, so I shan't say anything more. Only don't blame yourself Melicent. You did what you could."

"Are you sure: quite sure?"

"Quite sure." Darch petted her. "Don't make imaginary troubles for yourself, darling. There are quite enough as it is."

"That woman killed him, Miles."

"What makes you think that?"

"Miles," the girl raised her face to look at him in amazement, "who else could have done so?"

"Oh, I understand what you mean. But Jum told us that he saw her on the motor-cycle making for Brant at eight o'clock last night. And as your father was murdered much later,——"

"There was time for the woman to go to Brant and return from Brant. On a motor-cycle she could be here, there and everywhere, easily."

"But she was going to London."

"So she said, and so we believed. But she did not go, Miles. She returned to murder my father."

"But how did she get into the house?"

"I believed she climbed over the wall of the Sanctuary. The ladder we used to examine the closed hand of Hecate is still there, leaning against the inner wall. She could have descended by that."

"Granted. But how could she have ascended the outer wall?"

"I don't know," said Melicent, hopelessly, "but she is guilty. I saw her myself try to kill my father with that knife she snatched from the wall of the study."

"You forget that I saw her also," he said quickly. "Well?"

"Well, it is that very knife with which my father has been stabbed. I recognised it at once. Uncle Ralph told me at the time that it was an Afghan knife. That woman failed to kill father the first time, she succeeded the second time, and acted in precisely the same way. I wonder you didn't immediately guess the truth."

"I did think that Mam'zel Clarice had killed your father when Jum came with the news. But remembering how the boy had seen her leave Grenacer I thought that I was mistaken."

"People who go, can return," said Melicent, shaking her head, "I haven't the least doubt but what she is guilty."

"Nor have I, now that you have explained the method of the murder. However, my dear," Miles rose quickly, "we must look into matters. Have you telegraphed for your uncle?"

"Mrs. Frint has. She suggested doing so. And I have sent for Walters."

"The village policeman. That is wise. Let us see if he has arrived. I dare say Toby who came with me, has examined the body by this time."

"He can't have done so," said the girl quickly. "I've locked the door of the study and have the key in my pocket."

"A very wise precaution," was Darch's reply, "Things must be left as they were found until the police take charge."

"Mrs. Frint found my father dead, Miles. But I took his head on my lap, although she said that I shouldn't have touched him."

"It would have been wiser not to. Anyhow no one can say a word against your action which was the outcome of affection. Come, let us see Walters."

The village constable was a burly man with a red face and mild blue eyes, not particularly clever, but shrewd to a certain degree. His waiting for the key of the study was due to his respect for Melicent's natural grief. Meanwhile, he had heard all that was to be heard from Mrs. Frint, and was talking the matter over with the doctor when the young couple appeared. Melicent at once gave him the key.

"You will take charge of everything, Walters," she said, striving to be calm.

"Yes miss, until my superior officer comes. I have telegraphed to Serbery for the Inspector.

Jupp is his name, miss, and if any one can come at the truth he will. A clever man is Inspector Jupp, miss. And if I may say how very sorry I am, miss——”

“Yes! Yes!” Melicent waved her hand as they went to the study. “I know you are sorry, Walters, But don’t say anything more, or I shall break down.”

“I quite understand, miss,” said the constable sympathetically, and slipped the key into the lock.

Smith made a hasty examination and decided that the old man had died immediately, almost without pain, which was a comfort to Melicent. The blow must have been delivered with extraordinary force as it had pierced the stiff shirt front and penetrated the heart. How deeply, it was impossible to say, until the post mortem was held. Then Walters examined the room, to find that the door was open while only one of the two narrow windows was closed.

He also noted the books and loose papers lying on the floor and the two overturned chairs. Thence the policeman searched what Mrs. Frint called the garden, and climbed the ladder reared against the wall. For a long time he peered over, stretching down his arms and looking carefully right and left. When he descended, he turned to Miles.

“Would you mind coming with me sir, to examine the other side of the wall.”

“Certainly, Walters. But why?”

“There’s a chestnut tree growing on the other side, sir, which some one must have climbed.”

“How can you tell that, Walters?”

“Some twigs are broken and some branches are swept aside. It’s my opinion, sir,” added Walters, in quite an official way, “that some one climbed the top of the wall by that tree and came down on this side by the ladder.”

"I knew it, I knew it," cried Melicent, clapping her hands. "Mam'zel Clarice!"

"Ah!" said Walters sagaciously, for in common with the rest of the village he had heard the story of the woman's assault on the Squire. "Well I don't say anything yet miss, as we must have facts to go on. Best say nothing either, miss. Please wait here with the doctor until me and Mr. Darch come back. I dessay we'll learn something over the wall."

The roundabout way to the hither side of the Sanctuary was down the avenue, through the gates, and along by the river. It was this way that Melicent and the others had come on the night of the visit. But at the back of the house there was a small gate, through which a quicker path could be gained to the wood encircling the walls. Through this Walters and the barrister went, and soon found themselves in the gloomy grove of densely growing trees which gave the Hall its name. This was Thor's Wood, and in Saxon days had been dedicated to the Norse Thunder-god. His altar was traditionally reported to have stood where the statue of Hecate was now standing. Perhaps that was the reason why Amyas Hurst placed the image there knowing the sinister significance of the spot.

Darch and the policeman threaded their way through the trees and the brushwood carefully, and came finally to the chestnut tree, supposed to have been climbed. As Walters had placed the clue in his hands, Miles looked about with keen, observant eyes for traces of some person having been in the wood. There were plenty, for the person—presumably Mam'zel Clarice—had not taken much care, or indeed any care, to hide the trail. Broken branches, torn off leaves, trodden grass, showed plainly that a human being had been there, since in so civilised a locality no destroying animals could have entered the

woodland. The boughs of the chestnut tree grew close to the ground and it was easily climbed. Walters would have climbed it at once, but that Darch prevented him.

"Better wait until Inspector Jupp does that," he said warningly, "he will want to get first-hand evidence, and you can put him on the track of it. We had better see how the assassin got into the wood, by following the outward trail."

Walters thought that this was a good idea, so the two men, followed the evidences of a path having been forced through the undergrowth. Strictly speaking, Jupp should have been the first to do this also, but Darch was too impatient to wait. He had been sensible in not letting Walters climb the tree, but he was not sensible in following the out-trail, since the passage of himself and the constable might obliterate the traces left by the criminal. However, not thinking of this, the two pushed their way outward and soon gained the winding road which skirted the Gren. And here Darch made a discovery, which went far to excuse their hasty usurping of Jupp's function.

"See!" said the barrister, pointing to some beaten ground by the side of the road, half-encircled by small bushes, "oil."

"Oil!" Walters stared at the ground and noticed certain iridescent tints which denoted that oil had been spilt. "What of that, sir?"

"It is Mam'zel Clarice after all who is guilty," said Darch, aloud.

"Why do you think so, sir?" said Walters dubiously, "'cept that she said she'd stick the Squire and tried to do it, if what they say in the village is to be believed."

"Mam'zel Clarice intended to leave this place, Walters, and did so last night on her motor-cycle.

She was seen riding towards Brant. But she came back."

"How do you know, sir?"

"Because of this oil. The ground is too hard to show any marks of her machine, but she rested her cycle here, against these bushes, while she climbed the tree, descended the ladder and entered the house to stab the Squire. The oil of the machine dripped. Can't you see it."

Walters fell on his knees and put his nose to the iridescent patch. "Yes, sir, and smell it too. It's oil, sure enough. Are you sure it comes from Mam'zel Clarice's motor-cycle?"

"Well, she has one you know, and the Squire has been murdered with the same knife as she previously snatched from the wall. I haven't the least doubt in my mind, but what she is guilty."

"It looks like it," admitted Walters cautiously, "but if she came here on a motor-cycle, she went away on one."

"There's no doubt of that. Well?"

"It'll be hard to catch her," growled Walters, scratching his head.

"Harder than you know," said Darch grimly, and thinking of the woman's association with the French spy system, about which Melicent had told him, "she's as clever as a fox."

Walters nodded, and as they returned by the same way to the study, he openly wished that his Inspector would come. "Seems to me as this case is getting a bit beyond me," said the man, perplexed.

"Oh, I don't know. You have found out a lot," said Miles, giving all the praise to the man, which indeed he well deserved.

To the policeman's relief the Inspector was already on the spot when the two seekers got back to the house. Jupp had motored over the moment he

received the wire, and as the distance to Grenacer was not very great and his machine was a swift one, he had arrived very quickly. Walters gladly handed over all responsibility to his superior officer and made his report. It was received with thanks, for Jupp recognised the value of the information. In his turn he climbed the ladder, but, unlike Walters, he descended the chestnut tree, and then followed the outward trail as the others had done. When he returned it was to say that he felt sure about the presence of the motor-cycle on the evidence of the spilt oil. Then he proceeded to examine those present, and soon obtained all information about Mam'zel Clarice. The look on his face when he concluded his examination showed plainly that he believed the woman to be guilty. And, indeed, people have been condemned on less positive evidence.

"Now I'm going to the telegraph office to wire a description of the woman to various centres. I'll use the telephone also. Meanwhile, Walters, you look after things together with the three men I have brought over. And that image——"

"It's the cause of all the trouble," said Melicent, positively.

"Ah," said Jupp, staring at Hecate, "I've heard something of the story."

CHAPTER X.

MELICENT'S VOW.

IN due time Ralph Hurst arrived, as fast as train and motor could bring him to the scene of the crime. His clothes were in disorder, his face was haggard and pale, while he could hardly speak when he entered the drawing-room in which many people were assembled. Melicent was there, looking sorrowful and worn in her black dress, and Miles was beside her, anxiously attending to her every want. Smith was also present, and several of the servants and Inspector Jupp, who was asking them questions. Walters was on guard over the study and the body, while the other policemen were in various parts of the house. For the time being, military law, as it were, was established and Jupp held the reins of power. Ralph, covered with dust, looking more untidy and huge than ever, rushed into the room, and asked a question generally.

"Frint! Where is Frint?" he demanded, "she sent me a telegram saying that my brother had been murdered. They say it is true in Serbery and in the village. Tell me, some one, if it is true?"

"Calm yourself Mr. Hurst," said the Inspector, who recognised him at once, "It is true. Why should you doubt it?"

"It seems so impossible after all my care."

"Your care." Jupp looked the big man full in the face, "What do you mean?"

"My niece knows what I mean and so does Darch," said Ralph in a heart-broken tone, and sat down to hide his face.

"Mr. Hurst means that he took all precautions to prevent Miss Brown from getting into the house. He feared lest she should injure the Squire," explained Miles quickly.

"Miss Brown. Is that the woman known as Mam'zel Clarice?"

"Yes! Her name is Clarice Brown and she is French on the mother's side. As she taught French in the Serbery School, she preferred to be known as Mademoiselle Clarice. Locally she was known as Mam'zel."

"I knew she would do it if she could," groaned Ralph, raising his head, "ever since she snatched that knife from the wall and tried to kill him I knew she would, and I took all precautions to keep her out of the house. How, in Heaven's name, did she enter?"

"Climbed over the wall of that place where the image is," explained the Inspector, "but if you knew that she was bent upon murdering your brother why did you not have her arrested?"

"Because she promised to go away. My brother himself did not wish for her arrest. She is the daughter of his old tutor, for whom he had a great regard, and he wished to deal as gently as possible with her in spite of her uncontrolled temper, which led her to assault him."

"Why did she assault him?"

Ralph rose and staggered to the door. "I'll answer your questions later. I want to see Frint now, and learn all about the matter."

"Mrs. Frint has been examined and is so over-

come that she has gone to lie down," said Jupp, briskly, "and I think you had better lie down also for a hour, Mr. Hurst. I'll talk to you later and then you can tell me all about this woman. You look ill."

"I feel ill. My poor brother, Melicent," he turned back to embrace and kiss his niece, "only you and I are left of the family. We must revenge your father's death and get that vile creature hanged."

"Don't! Don't," said Darch, when Melicent burst out crying, "you upset her, and she has enough to bear as it is."

"We all have enough to bear and more than enough," muttered the big man in a dazed tone. "But I'll see Frint! Poor Frint, she must be heart-broken. And to think that I was away. Oh, if I had only stayed; if I had only remained to protect my brother."

"Don't give way, Mr. Hurst," Jupp took the man's arm and guided him towards the door, "lie down until you feel better."

"Yes, I'll lie down, but I'll see Frint first," said the man with a groan, and he stumbled out of the room in a dazed fashion.

"I think I'll go to him," said Melicent, rising and drying her eyes.

"No, leave him to himself until he grows calmer," said Miles, sensibly, "you are too sensitive yourself to console him. You'll only break down and then he will feel worse than ever. And I don't think that Mrs. Frint will do him much good either," finished Darch, grimly, for he was annoyed, for Melicent's sake, that the housekeeper had not kept her head.

So Melicent, with Darch's arm round her, sat quietly listening to the examination of the servants.

Jupp had already heard the story told by Miss Hurst and her lover, and was in possession of all necessary facts from the time of Mam'zel's ill-omened visit to the hour when she had presumably left on her motor-cycle for Brant. He had learned also about her attempt to get the postern-key and how it was foiled by Jum. The page, as Frederick Marr—so he was solemnly addressed by the Inspector—confirmed the story of the young couple in every particular. He and the other servants declared that they had heard no cry for help on the previous night, and that the fact of the murder did not become known until the discovery made by Mrs. Frint when she went into the study at seven in the morning. The housekeeper had already told all she knew, and her evidence, together with that of the servants and the lovers, placed the Inspector in possession of all that was to be known. It only remained for him to question Ralph, and then he would be in a position to supply the jury at the inquest with all available evidence.

Jupp took notes of the answers to his many questions, then dismissed the scared servants and afterwards gave instructions to Dr. Smith about the post-mortem. Then he advised Melicent to lie down, which she gladly did, being worn out with the events of the day. Darch, the Inspector retained by his side, as he wished for his opinion. Miles was quite willing to give it, although, he privately thought that the whole case was such plain sailing that it needed little explanation from him.

Jupp gave orders that the body of the Squire should be taken to his bedroom, which was accordingly done, and then asked Darch to come to the study. After the removal of the body this was put straight, and no trace remained of the grim scene save the stain of blood on the carpet and the

absence of the Afghan knife from the trophy of arms over the fireplace.

"What do you think of it all, Mr. Darch?" asked Jupp abruptly, when they were alone, and as he spoke his eyes rested on the Black Image.

"What can I think, but that this woman is guilty," said Darch promptly.

"I am of that opinion myself. But what I wish you to explain is, why this crime should be associated with that statue."

"I can't say, and in fact I can't see how the two are connected."

"Well," drawled Jupp, still staring at Hecate, "the news of how that hand had closed travelled even to Serbery, together with an account of the Hurst legend. A friend of mine who takes an interest in psychic matters, told me the story and was wildly excited when he heard that the hand was closed. I laughed at him. I don't laugh now." Jupp wheeled and looked at the barrister searchingly—so much that Darch expressed surprise.

"Are you superstitious, Mr. Inspector?" he asked with a shrug.

"On the contrary I am very matter-of-fact, and that is why I don't laugh now at the closing of that statue's hand. The legend says that when it closed it would bring misfortune to the Hursts. It certainly has done so."

"Well?" queried Darch considerably mystified.

"Well," echoed the officer impatiently, "can't you see that there is a connection between the image and the crime. Why should the hand be closed unless the person who closed it intended this murder."

"Oh!" Darch's breath was taken away by this supposition. "Then you don't believe that the statue closed it's hand itself?"

"No. Nor do you ; nor does any one except a fool. But why should the warning have been given? That is what I wish to know."

"I can't tell you. The thing is beyond me."

"Of course the hand being lead has been bent into the new shape," mused the Inspector. "It was closed by some one who knew the legend."

"The whole village knew it."

"Mam'zel Clarice also."

Darch shrugged. "Presumably. When the hand was closed every one talked about it you know."

"Yes. But the legend must have been known to Mam'zel Clarice beforehand, if she closed the hand by bending the fingers."

"But did she ? "

"Well, she committed the crime we know," Jupp twisted his lean brown face into a wry smile, "the evidence goes to prove beyond all doubt that she is guilty. She must have known the legend and she must have closed the hand."

"Well if you think so——"

"What else am I to think? Unless there is some one who knew of her intention, and strove to give the late Squire a warning sign. Do you know of any one who would do that ? "

"No. And the murder may not have been premeditated."

"This woman tried to kill the Squire before ? "

"Oh yes," admitted Darch, frankly. "I was present. But she made the attempt in a fit of passion because he refused her ridiculous claim to marry him, as Miss Hurst told you. She might have come to urge that claim again and then when he refused—as he certainly must have done—she might have lost her temper again and"—Darch spread out his hands to show that further explanation was wholly unnecessary.

"I see all that," said Jupp thoughtfully, "all the same, I hold to my opinion that there is some connection between the crime and the image. What that connection is I wish to find out."

"I can't help you. But here," Miles turned as the study door opened, "here is Mr. Hurst. He may be able to throw light on the subject."

Ralph entered looking pale and stern and much older than his years. As a rule, owing to his jovial nature, he appeared young and full of vitality—a boy who had never grown up. But there was nothing of this eternal youth about his looks to-day. Sitting down with a sigh, he rested his large hands on his knees and shook his head sadly at the two men.

"Poor Frint has told me how she found my poor brother dead," he said in a slow, heavy way, "she is broken-hearted, as she has known Edgar and I since we were all children together. But I must not give way to grief," he added with an effort to pull himself together, "you wish to ask me questions, Mr. Inspector. Here I am at your service. By the way, what light can I throw on the subject, and what is the subject? I heard Mr. Darch speaking when I entered. What have you been talking about?"

"That Black Image." Jupp pointed through the door.

Ralph started. "That image," he frowned "I wish it was melted down and destroyed," he cried vehemently, "it has brought all this trouble down on us if the legend is to be believed."

"Do you believe it, Mr. Hurst?" asked the Inspector sharply.

"As a story, yes—as a truth, no. All the same it is strange that the hand should close just before this misfortune has come. So far, the legend has proved true."

"Any person who knew the legend could close the hand by bending the lead and then bring misfortune to pass," said Jupp pointedly.

"I never thought of that," said Ralph looking startled again, as well he might when such a theory was placed before him.

"Well, I have thought of it, and as Mam'zel Clarice is proved plainly to be guilty, I believe she has something to do with the matter of the statue."

"But why should she trouble to close the hand, if she intended to murder my brother?" asked Ralph, looking puzzled.

"That's what I was talking to Mr. Darch about," said Jupp smartly, "the question is did she know the family legend?"

"Oh yes," replied Hurst unexpectedly. "When she visited here after her arrival in Grenacer, Edgar saw her in this room. She noticed the statue and afterwards I told her the story."

"There!" said Jupp triumphantly, "what do you think of that, Mr. Darch?"

"I think you are a very clever man, Mr. Inspector, to have put two and two together. All the same, I can't see any more than Mr. Hurst can see, why she should have given this warning of misfortune when she intended to bring about the same. To say nothing of the fact, that I tried myself to straighten the fingers of that leaden hand and couldn't. How then could she bend them?"

"How indeed?" said Ralph quickly, "unless she used some instrument. And as a member of the French Secret Service, she knew many tricks."

"French Secret Service," repeated the Inspector sharply, "what's that?"

"Ah I forgot. You wish to ask me questions. Well, then, before you begin I shall tell you what I know of this woman. When she came over here to

ask for assistance, Edgar requested me to learn what I could about her life in Paris. I went over there at his expense and found out a great deal."

Jupp was greatly interested in the story which Ralph now proceeded to tell him, and took many notes, while he asked many questions. The result of the new information confirmed him in his opinion that Mam'zel Clarice was guilty not only of the murder but of closing the hand of the image. It was just the kind of melodramatic thing which would appeal to the French side of her nature. When he replaced his pocket-book in its usual place next to his heart, the Inspector felt that he now knew everything necessary to bring home the crime to the woman. But the question was, how to catch her.

And it was Ralph who asked the question.

"Oh I've wired and telephoned her description everywhere," said Jupp, standing up to take his leave, "she won't go far before she's in the hands of the police."

"I have my doubts of that," said Hurst dryly. "Mam'zel hasn't been in the French Secret Service for nothing."

Ralph's doubts proved to be correct, for although the police were on the alert, and a description of the woman was circulated everywhere, no sign of her was found. She had disappeared as entirely as if the earth had swallowed her up, and when the day of the inquest came Mam'zel Clarice was still at large. Jupp was vexed, in spite of his success in placing before the twelve good and lawful men, so interesting and fully-stated a case. There was quite a crowd at the inquest from the surrounding countryside, for the dead man was well-known, and the connection of the family legend with the matter gave uncommon interest to the proceedings. In fact, the fame of the Black Image had travelled to

London, and several leading newspapers sent down reporters to see what was taking place. And the reports lost nothing in the telling, since the journalists endeavoured, and with success, to make them as picturesque-as possible by introducing the occult and the mysterious to flavour the prosaic occurrence of the murder. The crime and its psychic surroundings was quite a nine days' wonder, even in a city which usually forgets sensational things in nine minutes. And of course a portrait of Hecate, with her closed hand, appeared in the picture papers.

The evidence at the inquest was so plain that the jury had little difficulty in arriving at a sensible conclusion. A verdict of wilful murder was brought in against Clarice Brown, and with the consent of Melicent a reward was offered for her apprehension. It was a considerable sum, for the girl was determined to bring the murderess of her father to the dock. And she wished this the more so, as she still felt that she had not been so affectionate a daughter to her feeble father as she should have been. It was in vain that Miles assured her to the contrary, pointing out that she had done her best to soften the late Squire's rocky self-centred nature. Poor Melicent admitted that her father had been difficult in many ways but none the less condemned herself for an imaginary neglect, which no one but herself could see.

After the inquest followed the funeral, and to that came crowds of morbid people as well as many, who really wished to pay respect to the Hurst family. The Squire was laid to rest in the family vault under the shadow of the square tower, and Mr. James eulogised the deceased, as a good landlord, a good friend, and good man, Edgar Hurst was certainly all that in a negative way, as he had never harmed any one and on the whole had used his position and

his money in a kindly way. He had been neither a good hater, nor a good lover, but something between the two, when his feeble will did exercise itself to express his feelings. He was not black and he was not white ; but simply a kind of grey colour, which meant nothing. So the world, as represented by the village of Grenacer was neither the better nor the worse for his passing over. Everybody had dry eyes at that funeral.

When all was over Miles returned to the Hall with Melicent and her uncle in order to hear the will read. Darch was secretly surprised that Lady Gibson had not made a point of coming to see if the dead man had left her anything. But prostrated by the complete failure of her plans, the scheming matron was ill in London, and only sent a wreath to the funeral on behalf of herself and her daughter. Sylvia had written a letter of sympathy to Melicent and found it the most difficult epistle she had ever written. However, she said what she could, and Melicent knowing how hard it was for her friend to express herself under the circumstances, was quite content with what was said. So beyond Miles, there was no one present to hear the will read since he alone had any connection with the family through his engagement to Melicent. She sat beside him feeling very much comforted by his presence and listened to the lawyer while holding her lover's hand.

The will was very short. It left a few legacies to the servants with a particularly large one for Mrs. Frint ; an annuity of three hundred a year to Ralph, and the rest of the property entirely to Melicent. And as she would not attain the age of one and twenty for three months, Ralph was appointed her guardian meanwhile. When she did come of age the will directed that he was to hand

over the property to his niece without reserve of any kind and that she was to be her own mistress, dealing with it as she pleased. Nothing could have been more concise than the document, so it took a very short time to read.

When the lawyer departed, Ralph took Melicent's hand and kissed her solemnly on the forehead in a most affectionate way. "My dear," he said, "I am glad that your father has made so sensible a will."

"I wish he had left you a larger income," she said sadly, and touched by the affection of her uncle, "but I can give you more, uncle."

"I don't want it my dear. All I ask is to remain in my library with my beloved books. Though of course when you marry"—he looked at Darch.

"I'm sure Melicent and I will want you to stay here always," said Miles hastily, seeing that he was expected to say something.

"Well, well. I am glad. And I wish Melicent that you would marry Miles at once. It will assuage your grief for your father my dear."

"Oh, uncle, how can you speak like that. I can't marry until my year of mourning has expired and I don't think Miles expects that I should."

"You will do exactly as you please dearest."

"And suppose I don't marry you at all."

"Melicent!"

"I mean it Miles. For I shall not marry you until you bring the woman who killed my father to justice. I have vowed that to myself."

CHAPTER XI.

SMALL NOTHINGS.

AFTER the storm came the calm, and life at the Hall went on much the same as it had done before the tragic death of the Squire. Still there was a difference, as every one was much more subdued. Ralph, no longer laughed as jovially as he had done. Melicent brooded over imaginary shortcomings towards her dead father, and Mrs. Frint became suddenly old. The change was more apparent in her than in any of the others. Formerly, though a woman of fifty-four, she had never looked her age, owing to her bright disposition and comely face, together with her gay clothes and bustling habits. But after the tragedy, she, who used to be stout, became thin, and her face took on a terrified expression, which was accentuated by her black dress. Like Melicent she was in deep mourning and the dismal garb did not suit her. Although desiring all respect to be paid to the dead, Melicent sometimes wished that the housekeeper had retained her gay frocks, genial smile, and brisk habits. For as she was now, Mrs. Frint proved to be a thorough wet-blanket, and went about depressing every one.

And, indeed, there seemed to be a dark cloud resting on the Hall. Ralph remained in his library even longer than usual, Melicent moped about the

house, feeling thoroughly miserable, and even the servants went on with their work in a half-hearted way, whispering and nodding as if they expected further calamities to befall the Hursts. As a matter of fact, this was just what they did expect, for the hand of Hecate was still closed, and that—as every one was positive from experience—meant that troubles were not yet at an end. But what further disaster, they looked for, it was impossible to say. And throughout August the atmosphere of the house grew more and more dismal, until it seemed to be haunted and cursed. The villagers believed that it was and ascribed the unseen terror to the influence of the sinister Black Image, which still imposed its ominous spell on the Sanctuary.

Mrs. Frint could not bear the sight of it. In common with others, she was intensely superstitious, and insisted that it was responsible for all the trouble. Formerly she occupied a bedroom, on the second story of the house, the window of which looked directly into the Sanctuary. But the sight of the accursed image was too much for her, so she moved up to the third story of the Hall, which consisted mainly of disused garrets. One of these at the very back of the house, she made her bedroom, refusing to change it, in spite of Melicent's expostulations. Ralph himself, after his first outburst of sympathy with the old servant over his brother's death, took no notice of Mrs. Frint, and seemed inclined to blame her vaguely for not having protected Edgar from danger. Poor Mrs. Frint objected to this unjust condemnation, shadowy as it was, as she said very truly, that it had been out of her power to divert the disaster. But Ralph held to his opinion, although it was expressed in manner rather than in words, and rarely spoke

to the wan woman. Indeed he had little occasion to, since Melicent, as the young mistress of the house, controlled domestic affairs and gave orders. But the attitude of the late Squire's brother did not tend to raise Mrs. Frint's spirits, which became lower than ever.

Jum was the only lively person about the place. With the mercurial disposition of boyhood, he speedily recovered from the effects of the death, and darted about the house with his usual vivacity. In his bright blue suit with many buttons, he looked perfectly cheerful, and invariably had a merry grin on his face, which was quite a relief after the solemn visages of the others. The boy—as Melicent thought—seemed to have something on his mind; but that something was of an agreeable nature, for he looked brightly important and seemed to consider himself a person of great consequence. This might have been induced by the memory of the prominent part he had played in watching Mam'zel Clarice; but, as she had succeeded in her object, in spite of Jum's spying, this could scarcely have been the case. He had little to congratulate himself on, with regard to his work in that direction. Ralph rather tartly told him so on one occasion when the boy's whistling annoyed him, but the reproof did not seem to damp Jum's spirits. All he did was to keep out of Ralph's way, and as Hurst now took no more notice of him than he did of Mrs. Frint, this was easy. Melicent was surprised to see how indifferent her uncle was to the lad in whom he had formerly taken so deep an interest. Jum's education was no longer superintended and he was left to get along as best he could by himself.

Miles came pretty regularly to the Hall, but was not by any means so cheerful a visitor as he had been. Since his determination to make the best

of himself, he had been working hard in town at his profession, and thus was weary when he came back to Grenacer in the evening. He now saw chances of succeeding as a barrister, as he had induced various solicitors to promise him briefs dealing with minor cases ; but he saw also that, to succeed in pleasing the lawyers, he would have to put his shoulder to the wheel, and burn the midnight oil. Therefore, employed as he was with law books and briefs, and Acts of Parliament, he sometimes stayed away from the Hall longer than Melicent approved of. She felt that the whole situation had changed for the worse, and said as much to her lover.

The conversation took place in the drawing-room one evening, when a chill in the misty September air hinted that autumn had arrived. So damp and dismal was it out of doors, and so melancholy in the house, that the girl had ordered a fire to be lighted. Before this she was seated with Miles, and facing him across the hearthrug. They were alone after dinner, for, as usual, Ralph had retired to his beloved library. And a silence had ensued after a few attempts at conversation, for Miles was tired after an unusually hard day's work in his chambers, and did not feel disposed to be an agreeable rattle, after the fashion of young Marlow in Goldsmith's comedy. The silence got on Melicent's nerves in spite of the cheerful fire, and her excellent dinner. To Darch's amazement she hid her face in her hands and burst into tears. In a moment, he left his chair and knelt at her feet trying to remove her hands.

" My dearest girl, what is the matter ? " he asked, as she resisted this particular form of comfort.

" I'm so wretched," sobbed Melicent vehemently, " ever since poor father's death things have been dreadful."

"How dreadful?" asked Miles, more for the sake of keeping up the conversation than because he had any need to inquire.

"Oh you know, Miles. Uncle Ralph is either in the library or in town—he goes twice a week now and often three times. Mrs. Frint is as dismal as I don't know what, and the servants go about whispering, as if they expected more trouble, while Sylvia hasn't written me for ever so long. And you are not the best of company either. It's all horrid. I wish I was at the bottom of the sea."

"My dear." Miles put his arm round her waist, still kneeling, removed her two hands from her face and placed his dry cheek next to her wet one. "I know I'm rather quiet. But I am working so hard."

"You shouldn't work so hard," said Melicent, rather unjustly.

"Oh, my darling, when you wish me to make a name how can you say that. Unless I work hard, you'll never be the wife of the Lord Chancellor, you know."

"I don't want to be if the Lord Chancellor is to be so taken up with his work that he has nothing to say to me."

"Oh, but he won't be," protested Miles, laughing. "I'm only desperately hard at work now to make my name. When I have made it, then I'll have plenty of time to make you happy."

"But it's the present time that makes me so unhappy, Miles. And you'll be years and years and years before you are famous."

Miles stifled a laugh. "That doesn't show much belief in my talents, does it dear? Besides if you are having an unhappy time, I am having one also."

"Oh, Miles."

"Yes, I am," he persisted, "you refuse to marry me."

"Only until you capture that horrid woman."

"And how am I to capture her? She has vanished completely, and in spite of all the efforts of the police, she can't be found. I saw Inspector Jupp at Serbery yesterday and he has grave doubts if she ever will be found. In that case are you to remain a maid and I a bachelor for the rest of our natural lives?"

"I don't feel that it is right for me to marry while my father's death remains unavenged."

"I should be only too glad to avenge it dearest Mam'zel Clarice well deserves to pay the penalty of her dreadful crime. But I can't find her; nor can Jupp, nor the entire police force of the Three Kingdoms, to say nothing of the French police."

"What have they got to do with it?"

"A great deal. Jupp thought that Mam'zel might have evaded the English police to take refuge in Paris, which after all is where she intended to go. Therefore he communicated with the French police. They can't trace her anywhere. So you see that if she doesn't appear—and, so far as I can see, there is no likelihood of her appearing—we can never marry. So I am as unhappy as you are."

Melicent twisted her handkerchief. "I don't like being miserable," she said, after a pause.

"Nor do I," retorted Miles pithily.

"And I was rather silly to say what I did say."

"Very silly indeed." He kissed her. "Unsay it."

"Not altogether. That would be disrespectful to father's memory. But I'll unsay some of it."

"That's better than nothing. Well?"

"If you don't find Mam'zel Clarice in a year I'll marry you."

Miles kissed her again. "I shall keep you to that. You will marry me when your year of mourning is at an end."

"Yes ; I promise that. And Mam'zel ? "

"I'll do my best to find her meanwhile. But my hard work, which makes me so dull a companion ? "

"Go on with it, for my sake," said Melicent softly. "You aren't so very dull after all."

"Good girl !" Miles arose and stretched his tall figure to its greatest height. "I'm glad we have arrived at a compromise. And, to reward you for being more sensible, I'll tell you some pleasant news."

"About Mam'zel Clarice ? "

"That wouldn't be pleasant. No ; about Toby."

"And Sylvia ? " Melicent grew excited.

"Well, what concerns the one concerns the other. It seems that Toby has an uncle, who has discovered him, and wants to help him. This uncle is in the Norway trade and has made a heap of money out of wood, or turpentine, or something of that sort. He proposes to adopt Toby as his heir, if he marries with the approval of the aforesaid uncle," said Miles, speaking in quite a legal way.

"Oh, I'm sure he will approve of Sylvia."

"So Toby thinks, and so do I. But things are not yet arranged, so don't say anything to Sylvia in the meantime. She deserves some kind of punishment for not having written to you."

"It's that horrid mother of hers. I don't blame Sylvia. Besides, she wrote to me immediately after father's death. I am fond of Sylvia."

"So is Toby, and I think if his choice satisfies this wealthy uncle, as I believe it will, that Lady Gibson will be only too glad to accept him as a son-in-law."

At this moment Ralph entered the room. He was in evening dress, and looked quite smart. Indeed, since Edgar's death the surviving brother had begun to pay much more attention to his clothes and general appearance. He rubbed his hands, cast

a keen glance at the lovers and advanced towards the fire.

"I'm horribly cold and feel rather miserable," he said, with a shiver.

"That is what Melicent has been saying," remarked Daïrch lightly.

"Cold, with this splendid fire." Ralph spread out his hands to warm them.

"No ; I said I felt miserable," observed the girl. "Things are so dull here that I don't know what to do with myself."

"You are hipped, and no wonder," said her uncle, hunkering down to bring his large hands closer to the blaze. "But it's your own fault, Melicent. Why do you stay here when Lady Gibson is ready to receive you?"

"Is she, uncle?"

"Yes. Don't you remember how you wished to go to town immediately before your father's death? I told you that I would speak to Lady Gibson. I did when I was in London, and she says she will only be too pleased if you will pay her a visit. You had to postpone that visit for a few weeks on account of what has happened, but why not pay it now?"

"I think I will. Not that I like that horrid Lady Gibson, but I am fond of Sylvia."

"I'm fond of her also," said Hurst, unexpectedly.

"Oh, you always were," said his niece easily. "And she likes you."

"But I am talking seriously. I love Sylvia."

"Uncle!" Melicent stared at him and Miles stared also.

Hurst rose to shake himself like a big Newfoundland dog and laughed in his old jovial manner. "Why should you both look so surprised?" he said, raising his thick eyebrows. "It was my loyalty to Edgar that made me hold my tongue."

But I loved Sylvia from the first moment I saw her, and wished very much to marry her. In spite of my white hair I am only fifty-one, not too old to make her my wife, I hope."

"But she loves Toby," cried Melicent, who never thought that this elderly man possessed a vein of romance.

"Well, she can't marry Toby. He's got no money."

"You aren't very rich either, uncle. At least not rich enough to satisfy Lady Gibson."

Ralph cast such a black look on his niece that Miles, who was watching him, started with amazement. It suddenly occurred to him that the man's nature was by no means so jovial as it seemed to be. Melicent's remark touched him nearly, and he winced. A moment later the black look disappeared and the jovial laugh rang out. But now, to Miles's ears, the laughter did not ring so true. The mask—if it was a mask—had slipped, and Darch had caught a glimpse of something he did not like. Hurst saw his amazed face and at once apologised. "Excuse my scowling," he said amiably, "but Melicent's remark made me remember how difficult Lady Gibson is to deal with. I had forgotten her for the moment. As to my not being rich, that is quite true; but with what I have myself from my mother, and this annuity coming from my brother, I shall have at least seven hundred a year. That mightn't satisfy Lady Gibson, but it may Sylvia."

"Only marriage with Toby will satisfy Sylvia," said Melicent positively.

"But he has no money, as I said before. Seven hundred a year is better than what Smith can offer."

"Toby will have plenty of money soon," said Miles, determined to urge his friend's case. "I am

not breaking any confidence in telling you that Toby has found a rich uncle who intends to make him his heir."

"Oh!" Hurst looked blank at this, and it was only with an effort that he prevented the black look from again overspreading his face. "That's bad news for me. Does Lady Gibson know?"

"No; and Toby doesn't intend to tell her just yet."

"Well, then, Melicent, when you go to town don't you tell Lady Gibson the amount of my money. Say nothing about your father's will, or about my other income. In this way Lady Gibson, knowing nothing of my position nor the true position of Smith, will be able to choose between us without bias."

"I shall not say anything, uncle. But if she thinks you are poor, and as she knows that Toby is poor, she'll make Sylvia marry some one else."

"I think I can prevent that," retorted Ralph, setting his jaw. "Lady Gibson is clever, but she can be managed by one who knows her weak points."

"What are they?" inquired Miles, wondering at this confidence. "I have never seen any."

"You will after I have spoken to her," said Ralph grimly. "And, meanwhile, I have your promise to say nothing, Melicent."

"You have my promise," she answered; "and I shall be glad to get away from Grenacer for a time."

"Stay away as long as you like," said Ralph, in quite his old genial manner, which now, in some vague way, Darch mistrusted. "Mrs. Frint can look after things here as usual, and I'll run up to town occasionally. Now that I am your guardian, Melicent, and have to go out into the world, you can see that I am getting quite smart in my looks." He laughed and turned round. "I intend to give up my library for the time being, and to go a-wooing,

like the frog in the song. First your wedding, and then mine—that is, if you ever intend to marry Miles, seeing what a silly vow you made.”

“I have changed my mind about the vow,” said Melicent, colouring and slipping her hand into that of Darch. “There seems to be no chance of Mam’zel being discovered, so I have promised to marry Miles in a year.”

Ralph frowned. “When you make a solemn vow you shouldn’t break it, child. I am glad, all the same, that you have reconsidered the matter. A year,” he nursed his chin in his hand musingly, “well, much may happen in a year.”

“What do you mean?” demanded the barrister sharply, for he did not like the tone in which this was said.

“I mean that Sylvia and I may be married before the year is out,” laughed Hurst, “unless, of course, there is more trouble to come from Hecate. The hand is still closed, remember.”

“Such rubbish,” said Darch roughly, while Melicent shivered.

“Of course it is. No sensible person believes the story save this foolish girl who told it.”

“Well, trouble did come after the hand was closed, Uncle Ralph.”

“Oh, that was a mere coincidence. Or, perhaps, Jupp’s theory is correct.”

“What is it?” asked the girl curiously.

“Never mind. It doesn’t matter. But if you are so afraid of this statue, Melicent, and it infects you with fear, as it seems to do, why not have it taken away and melted down?”

“No! No! No!” cried Melicent forcibly. “That would do away with the luck of the Hursts.”

“And a good thing, too, if the luck is to be what it has been lately,” said Hurst, with a ponderous

shrug. "However, have it your own way. You are the mistress here, or you will be in two months. But I advise the melting down of that leaden monstrosity, if only to remove your obsession."

"I think it would be a good thing to do," urged Miles, agreeing with the man. "It's not a pretty object, Melicent, and its influence is bad."

"Bad or good, I intend to leave it alone," she said firmly. "I believe that some day the hand will open and that all will be well."

"But the hand is still closed," said Ralph, "and if misfortune comes——"

"Miles will help me to face it," finished Melicent, "and prevent it."

"He couldn't do that in the past," said Ralph significantly, "and by the past we must judge the future."

CHAPTER XII.

TOBY'S UNCLE.

TWO or three days later Melicent went up to London, having received in the meantime a gushing letter from Lady Gibson, saying how delighted she would be to see her. The girl was glad to leave behind the gloomy house and its gloomy inhabitants, for the shadow resting on the Hall was darker than ever. Ralph, saying that he would follow her at the end of the week, and bring her back if she was then ready to return, placed her in Darch's charge and told her to enjoy herself. He was thoroughly amiable, and kindly attentive to his niece, as he always was. Nevertheless, Miles could not forget those dark looks in the drawing-room, nor the significant remark which closed the conversation. Somehow, and without any apparent reason, he mistrusted the big man, and longed to have an opportunity of confiding his feeling to Toby. But for the last few days Toby had been in London, attending to his uncle in a most diplomatic manner.

Miles drove with Melicent in a taxi to Lady Gibson's flat, which was in Kensington, and gave her into the hands of that frivolous individual. She wished the young man to remain and talk over the Squire's death, but Darch, who had no great love

for her, excused himself. He did not even care for Melicent to be with her, and would have objected to the visit being paid but for the presence of Sylvia. While Lady Gibson took Melicent to her room and helped her to remove her things, Sylvia seized the opportunity of speaking to the barrister. With a glance at the drawing-room door she placed a warning finger on her lips and spoke to him softly.

"I have seen Toby," she said, blushing, "and we want you to help us."

"Of course I'll help you. What is it?"

"Hush, not so loud. Mother is so suspicious. Now that poor Mr. Hurst is dead she wants me to marry an old Greek merchant who has plenty of money."

"And you?" Miles was openly shocked at this new scheme of the unscrupulous, fortune-hunting mother.

"I am going to stick to Toby. I did my best to obey mother with regard to poor Mr. Hurst, but now I can't bring myself to sacrifice my life to her any longer."

"I quite approve, if my approval is worth anything."

"Oh, it is. Toby and I require your friendship, and, what is more, we require a proof of it."

"Granted. Well?"

"I want you to ask Melicent and me to see your chambers in three days, during which time Toby will see you to arrange a meeting between us. Mother will never suspect anything, and then we can talk over things."

Miles nodded. "I'll do what you ask with pleasure, Miss Gibson."

"Sylvia; you used to call me Sylvia."

"When you were engaged to my deceased father-in-law that was to be. Somehow, through Melicent,

I felt I had the right, as we were to be all one family. You understand?"

"Yes. But you can call me Sylvia still," she blushed again.

"Very well, Sylvia. Go on."

"I have said all that I wanted to say," she answered, "except that Toby is in London with his uncle, and wants me to meet him. I don't know why," Sylvia shook her head, looking puzzled, "as I don't think his uncle is rich enough to do anything for us. All the Smiths are so poor."

"Oh, I expect Toby wants you to know his family. First this uncle, and then his father and mother and sisters. I tell you, what Sylvia, I'll give you and Toby, the uncle and Melicent, a little luncheon in some Fleet Street restaurant. My chambers are in the Temple, you know."

Sylvia clapped her hands. "Oh, that will be delightful."

"What will be delightful?" Lady Gibson, followed by Melicent, popped into the room unexpectedly. "What is delightful?" she asked, putting up her lorgnette with a suspicious look, for she knew that Darch was a friend of Toby's.

"Mr. Darch wants Melicent to come to luncheon and visit his chambers the day after to-morrow, and invites me to come also, mother."

"The day after to-morrow. What are my engagements?" said Lady Gibson, to the dismay of the three, and went to an escritoire to take a little red book out of the drawer. "M'm! m'm!" she said pensively running her eye over the pages, "I'm afraid I can't accept, Mr. Darch."

"Oh, Lady Gibson," cried Melicent, coming to the rescue, "you won't stop Sylvia from coming with me. I should so hate to go alone. There will only

be our three selves," ended Melicent, ignorant that Toby intended to be of the party.

"But your uncle is coming up to town the day after to-morrow," said Lady Gibson. "He wants to see me particularly, and of course will want to see you."

"He sees enough of me," said Miss Hurst ungratefully. "Do consent to let Sylvia come with me."

Lady Gibson did not wish to make herself disagreeable to Melicent now that the girl had her father's money and the Hall. She might be, and probably would be, a useful friend. "Well, I can't resist your pleading, dear," she said, with a gracious smile. "Sylvia shall go. But you will excuse me from coming, Mr. Darch. I have to remain here to see what Mr. Hurst wants."

"I am sorry you can't come," said Miles gravely, and rather hypocritically; "but duty, of course, comes before pleasure."

"I'm a martyr to duty," sighed Lady Gibson. "Au revoir for the present. Do come and see me sometimes. But I hope," up went the lorgnette again, and she again looked suspicious, "that you have not invited that annoying Dr. Smith to luncheon?"

"No," said Darch, in perfect good faith, "I have not invited him," and having scored a point in Sylvia's favour, he took his departure.

That same day, believing that all was fair in love and war, he telephoned to the hotel where his friend was staying with the newly-found uncle. In answer to the request to call, Toby came round straight away, bubbling over with spirits, and perfectly certain that his troubles and Sylvia's troubles would shortly be at an end. He explained that his Uncle George wished him to marry, and would supply him with

the means of marrying, if he approved of the future Mrs. Horace Smith. He mentioned also that his uncle was following him to Darch's chambers, having overheard the telephone message. It appeared that he wished to see what kind of a bosom friend his nephew had.

"I hope he'll approve," said Miles, smiling, "of me and Sylvia. By the way, she said that I could call her Sylvia. Your uncle seems to be suspicious, Toby."

"Well, he's rather eccentric, because he was jilted by a girl who married a rackets chap. If Sylvia was a flirt and you an idler, uncle wouldn't give me a sixpence. But as she's an angel, and you are an old wiseacre, I expect he'll be quite satisfied and come down with the dust. What do you wish to see me about, Miles?"

"In the first place, I wish you to come to luncheon the day after to-morrow at two o'clock Melicent is coming and—Sylvia."

"Not Lady Gibson?"

"No! set your mind at rest. I managed to prevent her coming by saying that I had not invited you. And when I said that," added Darch laughing, "I really had not invited you, Toby, as you know."

"Thanks ever so much, old man." Smith shook hands warmly. "Can I bring my uncle? It will be a good chance for him to meet Sylvia."

"I'll ask your uncle to join us when he comes in."

"Good! And your second object in wishing to see me?"

"Ah, that is more serious. You have been away attending to this uncle of yours, Toby, and I have not had a chance of asking you a question."

"Ask it now."

"What do you think of Ralph Hurst?"

Toby stared at his friend in amazement. "Why, we've settled our mutual opinion of him long ago, Miles. He's a good-hearted, decent old book-worm."

Darch nodded. "So I thought ; so you thought. But I am inclined to change my opinion, and wonder if he isn't a wolf in sheep's clothing."

"Why should you think that?" Smith was more amazed than ever.

Darch rapidly told him of the conversation in the drawing-room, of the dark looks cast at Melicent, and mentioned the significant remark about the future being judged by the past, relative to looking after Melicent. "It appears to me now that Hurst has been wearing a mask, and is by no means the harmless old student we believed him to be."

"I should think not," cried Toby, intensely angry that the old man should dare to think of Sylvia, for Miles had repeated Hurst's confession. "How dare an old buffer like that think Sylvia would look at him?"

"Now that his brother is out of the way, he may think that he has a chance."

"Then he hasn't ; and"—struck by a sudden thought he stared at his friend, horrified—"I say, Miles, you surely don't think that Ralph has put the Squire out of the way so as to make love to Sylvia?"

"Oh, no, no ; I don't think he is so bad as that," said Darch hastily. "But he has been shut up for years with his books, and now that his passions are aroused by Sylvia's beauty he wants to go out and enjoy himself. His money is limited, and he wants all he can get to marry Sylvia, so—well, I'm not at all easy in my mind regarding his treatment of Melicent."

"Has he behaved badly to her?"

"Not so far. But the looks he cast on her were a revelation."

"You're running your head against a stone wall, my son," said the doctor roughly. "Hurst may be inclined to play the fool in his old age, but I don't think he'd harm Melicent. He's too fond of her."

"His looks didn't show that. Anyhow, I intend to keep my eye on him."

"Do so; but it's all moonshine. There's nothing wrong with the old buffer save his cheek in running after Sylvia."

"That's bad enough," said Miles, thinking that perhaps, after all, his friend was right and that he was making something out of nothing; "and he'll get the mother on his side."

"Not unless he can show a good banking account."

"Hum!" said Miles, getting alarmed again; "that's what I'm afraid of. However, he's treating Melicent all right just now, so perhaps I am talking nonsense."

"I am sure you are," said the doctor emphatically, then, as a knock came to the door, he jumped up from his chair, "that's Uncle George."

Uncle George, introduced by the small office boy, proved to be a cheerful, white-haired ancient, very shabbily dressed. No one would have taken him to be worth sixpence, yet Toby assured his friend in a whisper that this poverty-struck looking relative could sign his name to a cheque for many thousands. Uncle George, who seemed to be decidedly eccentric, stared long and hard at Darch, then offered him his hand again.

"You'll do," he said in a thin, piping voice. "You look sensible, and likely enough will be a good

friend to Horace here. I don't want my money to go to a spendthrift, Mr. Darch, and a man is known by his friends."

"Toby isn't a spendthrift, neither am I, Mr. Smith."

"Toby! Oh, you mean Horace. Well, I'm glad to hear it. I've worked hard for my money, and wish to leave it to a safe person. Horace's father, my brother, is too speculative for my taste, and if I left it to him he'd soon make ducks and drakes of it."

"I never speculate," said Toby virtuously.

"I'll put a clause in my will that you'll lose my money if you do," said the ancient in his piping voice, which was firm enough for all its thinness. "Now about this marriage, Mr. Darch. I've heard Horace's story, but I want to hear yours."

"It's the same as Toby's," replied the barrister.

"Never mind; I want to hear your version."

"Miss Gibson is a charming and beautiful young lady, and is the dearest friend of the girl I am going to marry."

"But is she sensible?"

"Very; and what is more, she is self-denying. To save her mother from ruin she was prepared to marry an old man who——"

"Yes! Yes! I heard all about the murder. Horrid!" Uncle George made a grimace. "I don't care for such things, which, after all, aren't my business. I want to get Horace a good wife, who won't squander my money."

"Miss Gibson won't," Darch assured him. "She's as sensible as Toby, and that is saying a good deal, for he's a Socrates for wisdom."

"You make me blush," murmured Toby with a grin.

" Well, well, that's good hearing, Mr. Darch. But the mother——"

" She wants her daughter to marry money. That's the difficulty."

" Not with Toby, as you call Horace. When I die he'll have five thousand a year, and while I live he'll have two thousand when he marries. I made the money in the Norway trade, and it's honestly come by. But this mother need not know anything about the money. I told Horace not to tell her."

" And that's the difficulty," said Smith dismally. " Lady Gibson will never let Sylvia marry me thinking that I am poor, which I am."

" Will Sylvia marry you if you are poor ? "

" Yes, Uncle George, to-morrow," said Toby promptly.

" Good ; she's a sensible girl," the ancient chuckled. " We'll have a little plot, Horace, to make sure that she is sensible. Don't tell her that I am rich. I'm sure I don't look it," he added, glancing down at his shabby clothing. " But introduce her to me, and let her think that I am a poor relative. Upon the way she treats me will depend my consent to the marriage."

" But Lady Gibson ? "

" She shan't know anything. If the girl marries you the mother will believe that she—the mother, I mean—is ruined. Then we can tell her the truth, after making sure that the girl really loves you."

" It will have to be a runaway match, then," said Toby ruefully.

" And why not ? " demanded the unprincipled old man. " You've got no romance about you, boy. But not a word of the money to the mother or to the daughter, remember. Let me manage things in my own way. Now then, how can I meet the girl and test her,"

"Come with Toby here the day after to-morrow at two o'clock, Mr. Smith. Miss Hurst, to whom I am engaged, and Miss Gibson are coming to luncheon."

"Good! Ah, you're a sensible chap! I'm glad Horace has such a friend. And now we'll go, Mr. Darch. I've tickets for a music-hall. They're paid for and must be used. It doesn't do to waste money."

Toby winked at Darch and strode after his eccentric relative, who trotted away chuckling at the little plot he had made. Miles was glad to think that things were going smoothly with Toby, and chuckled to himself to think how enraged Lady Gibson would be on hearing of a runaway marriage and how amazed when the truth came to light. He laughed aloud at the idea, and Toby's peculiar wooing, superintended by the queer old man, drove all thoughts of Ralph's possible wickedness out of his head. This was a good thing, for the idea of the man being evil was becoming an obsession. Yet, on the face of it, Miles had no reason to believe Ralph other than what he appeared to be, and what he always was, during his brother's lifetime.

With the day came the hour, and with the hour came two beautifully-dressed damsels to the somewhat dingy chambers of the barrister. Uncle George and the obedient Toby had already arrived, and were waiting impatiently for the advent of beauty. Sylvia, warned beforehand that the uncle was a most eccentric person, as poor as a church-mouse and as obstinate as a mule, was somewhat nervous. She loved Toby so much that she was anxious to stand well with his relatives, however poor and disagreeable they were. But, to her surprise, she found Uncle George anything but disagreeable, although

she firmly believed, from what Toby had told her and from the look of his clothes, that he had no money. The old merchant was most kind and courtly in every way, so that both the girls took quite a fancy to him. He was full of humour, and had quite the manner of the old school of politeness, in spite of his plebeian name. By the time they reached the restaurant and were seated at a retiring table, in a snug corner, Sylvia and Melicent were getting on capitally with the old gentleman. But it was chiefly to Miss Gibson that he paid attention, which, Melicent thought, was natural enough under the circumstances. It was a merry luncheon party, for the old gentleman made many jokes and kept every one laughing. At times Melicent felt that she was acting wrongly in attending such a party and in being amused, seeing that her father had been dead for such a short time; but she knew that a mournful seclusion would only make her brood and worry herself into an illness, therefore stilled her conscience and enjoyed herself. Also she was reassured by Darch's glances and the pressure of his hand—under the table. He was delighted to see that she was acting reasonably. All the same Melicent was very quiet during the meal, which, after all, was given for the benefit of Sylvia and Toby, so that their course of love might run smoothly.

"Fond of money?" asked Uncle George, pouncing on Sylvia, for he was always on the watch for testing her.

"I am fond of what money can buy," she replied.

"A sensible answer, a very sensible answer," chuckled the ancient; "and I suppose you want to get all that money can buy?"

"I have got what money can't buy," said Sylvia, with a glance at Toby, "and that is love."

"My nephew. But he's poor, you know. A poor struggling doctor."

"I can struggle with him."

"And you would?" he looked at her keenly.

"Yes; of course there are difficulties." Sylvia sighed.

"Is Constantine Tahinos one of the difficulties?"

As this was the name of the Greek merchant whom Lady Gibson was now stalking, Sylvia looked surprised, and blushed. "Do you know him?"

"Oh, yes! he's a friend of mine. I understood him to say that he admired a certain Miss Gibson greatly. That is why I was so anxious to meet you. Of course Mr. Tahinos is very rich."

Sylvia looked haughty. "What is that to me?"

"Uncle," broke in Toby anxiously.

"Let me be, boy. I want to know if Miss Gibson—well, well, we'll say no more about it. Only I am too poor to afford a very handsome wedding present to Tahinos."

"Is he going to be married?" asked Darch, sipping his coffee.

"Miss Gibson can answer that."

"Miss Gibson can't," said Sylvia, with a heightened colour. "Why not talk of my marriage to Toby, Mr. Smith. It is a much more agreeable subject."

"You really think so; you really think so?"

"Yes!" Sylvia was annoyed by the old man's persistence, yet could not help smiling at the humorous twinkle in his eye.

With the monosyllable Uncle George seemed to be contented, and changed the subject with great tact. For the rest of the time everything went very well, and then the two girls took their departure, as they had some shopping to do. Uncle

George saw them depart, then seized his nephew's hand.

"Marry her, my boy ; marry her. She's a sensible girl. Marry her."

All this was very agreeable and very wisely settled, for Sylvia did seem inclined to refuse further sacrifice for her mother's selfish sake and accept the poor doctor whom she truly loved. And Uncle George, who had quite fallen in love with her, chuckled, with many rubbings of his hands, when he thought of the great surprise that was in store for her, and for her mother also, little as that mother deserved it. But here Fate stepped in to overturn all these agreeable arrangements.

The two girls made their purchases and then returned to the Kensington flat to find that Mr. Hurst had come and gone. They were glad of this, as neither one of them wished to see him particularly, pleasant as he was. Sylvia wished to talk about Toby and his delightfully eccentric uncle to Melicent, although she wondered how she could manage to do this with her mother at her elbow. Lady Gibson, however, had retired to her room, and instead of coming out to attend to her guest, sent for her daughter. For quite an hour the two were together and Melicent was growing very tired of her own society, when Sylvia returned.

But how changed she was. Toby's wooing had flushed her face and had made her eyes as bright as stars, while she laughed and talked gaily. Now, in place of her happy companion, Melicent saw the Sylvia of the old days, white and silent, statuesque and scornful. Putting her questions aside, Miss Gibson went to the escritoire and wrote a short letter. This she directed and stamped, then summoned the maidservant to take it to the post. Afterwards she turned to her astonished friend.

"We must have dinner alone," she said. "Mother is unwell and has gone to bed. You don't mind, do you?"

"I'm glad. We can talk about Toby undisturbed."

"I shall never talk of Toby again. I shall never marry him."

"Sylvia!" Melicent stared with her mouth open.

"I have dismissed Toby in that letter and I am to marry your Uncle Ralph."

CHAPTER XIII.

DOUBTS.

WHILE absent in London attending to the demands of his wealthy relative, Toby had left a *locum tenens* behind to look after his Grenacer practice. And as Uncle George agreed to pay the substitute, the young doctor was in no hurry to return. The more so as he had chances of seeing Sylvia in town which were wanting in the country. Therefore Miles was left entirely to his own company, and this especially since Melicent went to stay with Lady Gibson. During this isolation he worked hard at his law-books and briefs, going to the metropolis and returning with due regularity. Sometimes he went to Kensington to see the girl, and noticed that she looked worried and pale. The reason of this she refused to tell him.

The truth was that after telling Melicent of her intention to throw over Smith and marry Ralph, Sylvia insisted that her friend should say nothing to Miles of her determination. The secret preyed on Melicent's mind, as she could not understand the reason of this sudden change when everything had seemed to be going in Toby's favour at the luncheon. Darch also noted that Sylvia had returned to her old silent attitude, but did not connect that with Melicent's sick looks. He thought that Lady Gibson

was worrying both the girls, and therefore urged Melicent to return to Grenacer. This the girl was unwilling to do. Since Sylvia had announced her intention to marry Ralph, his niece began to doubt her uncle. No man, as she thought, and said, could be really good if he forced Sylvia into a marriage against her wishes. This, as it plainly appeared, was what Ralph was doing, with the countenance of Lady Gibson. Sylvia made no explanation.

Miles was puzzled to account for these things, but his bewilderment was dispersed one morning by the unexpected appearance of Toby. For the last few days the young man had been in Paris, since his uncle had the whim to go there immediately after the luncheon. It was part of his plan, he said, to see if Sylvia would remain true to his nephew while they were parted. As he had seen Sylvia and knew how deeply she was attached to Toby, this experiment seemed to be wholly unnecessary, but Uncle George was eccentric, and his eccentricity had to be humoured. Toby hated to leave London when things were going so well with him and Sylvia, but he was forced to obey his rich relation, who had everything to do with the final adjustment of things. In a few days Toby returned, and at his hotel where he stayed with Uncle George, found the letter which Sylvia had written. The reading of it upset him altogether, and he rushed away immediately to see his friend and to consult him as to the meaning of this thunderbolt from the blue.

Miles was surprised when Toby entered like a whirlwind and, without a word, placed the letter before him. He inquired anxiously what was the matter, but the doctor merely pointed to the letter in silence, then flung himself into a chair to cover his face with his hands. Considerably puzzled by all this pantomime Miles sought the solution in

the epistle, and found it there with a vengeance. Sylvia wrote saying that, by the wish of her mother, she intended to receive the addresses of Ralph Hurst, and that, although she loved Toby, and would always love him, there was no help for it but to throw him over in Hurst's favour. Here the letter ended, but a postscript saying that the change of mind was *not* due to the money question, showed how anxious the writer was to stand well with the man she was—on the face of it—treating so badly. Miles read this letter once; he read it twice; he read it three times, and then sat back in his chair to wonder what it all meant. He asked this question of Toby, who groaned.

"That is what I have come to ask you," said Toby wretchedly. "I think Sylvia must be out of her mind to blow hot and cold in this way. At that luncheon you gave she told me positively that she did not intend to sacrifice herself any more over the money question with regard to her mother. Yet she now—she now"—the worried young man choked and pointed to the letter, "she now writes like that," he finished with a gasp.

"It's not the money question this time," commented Miles, knitting his brows and reflecting; "the postscript shows that."

"But what other reason can there be? We know that all along Lady Gibson has wanted Sylvia to marry a rich man for her to sponge on. Failing the Squire, who is dead, Lady Gibson wants Hurst as her son-in-law."

"Hurst is not rich."

"She doesn't know that. You told me yourself that Hurst asked Melicent not to say anything about the will and his private income."

"I did," assented Miles, nodding. "All the same, Lady Gibson must know that Melicent in-

herits the Squire's property, and cannot think that Hurst has benefited sufficiently largely by the will to make him a good match for her daughter. That is, of course, seeing what large ideas of money Lady Gibson has. Then there is this Greek merchant, Constantine Tahinos, of whom your uncle spoke. He is a millionaire, as I have been making inquiries, and it seems that he admires Sylvia excessively. Lady Gibson would certainly not fish for a sprat when she could fish for a whale, and she would prefer Tahinos to Hurst a thousand times if it were a mere question of money."

Toby nodded and leaned forward to rest his elbows on his knees and his chin in the cup of his hands. "I suppose that's true. But what other reason can there be?"

"You must ask Hurst that," interrupted Miles, quietly but meaningly.

"Hurst!" Toby sat up and stared.

"Yes! I told you that I mistrusted the man. The postscript to this letter makes me mistrust him more than ever. He is a wolf in sheep's clothing."

"But I don't see——"

"I am surprised at that," said Darch, interrupting him again. "Sylvia says plainly in the postscript that her change of mind is *not* due to the money question. Therefore, it must be due to something else."

"True. Well?"

"Well, we know that Sylvia loves you, and that only for the sake of her mother would she jilt you in favour of Ralph. He, if you remember, was to pay her a visit while the girls were at lunch with us. Depend upon it, he did so, and what he said to Lady Gibson was told to Sylvia when she returned home. Hence this letter."

"But what could Hurst have said to Lady Gibson

to make her agree to Sylvia's marriage with him rather than with Tahinos? "

"Ah, that's what we've got to find out! In my opinion it is a case of sheer blackmail."

"Blackmail? "

"Toby, do pull yourself together and don't go on repeating my words like a cuckoo. Of course it's blackmail. Hurst knows something about Lady Gibson which has forced her to consent to this rotten marriage."

"I see." Smith rose and began to pace the room excitedly. "Shall I go to Lady Gibson or to Sylvia and ask what it is? "

"They would both refuse to receive you. The mother because she dare not say what means Hurst used to coerce her, and the daughter because she has to respect her mother's secret, for which she is paying so dear."

"What's to be done? "

"Nothing more than I am already doing. Hurst must be watched, and I am watching him on Melicent's behalf. You must join with me in watching him for Sylvia's sake."

"You really think that he is a blackguard? "

"I was inclined to think so before, when he dropped the mask and showed his real face. I am still more inclined to believe so now, when I guess that he has used threats to compel Lady Gibson to agree to the marriage. If it were the old question of money it wouldn't matter. But it isn't that."

"No, it isn't that," said Smith mechanically. "Do you think that I could induce Sylvia to elope with me? "

"Not while her mother is in Hurst's power. What the secret is which gives this man such a hold over Lady Gibson I don't know. But I am confident that there is a secret, and a pretty dangerous one,

else Lady Gibson would not have agreed to the marriage so readily when there was a chance of trapping Tahinos. We must learn that secret and save Lady Gibson. Then, out of gratitude, money or no money, she will agree to your becoming the husband of her daughter."

"But how are we to learn the secret?"

"I can't say at present. But you must return to Grenacer and help me to watch Hurst. In some way or another he may give himself away. I only hope that Lady Gibson will keep Melicent with her, for I am afraid there is danger in that dear girl going back to the Hall."

"Why?"

"How stupid you are, Toby," said Darch impatiently. "Melicent has the property now, but if anything happens to her Ralph gets it. And Ralph wants it so as to be rich when he marries Sylvia, which he certainly will do unless you and I can clip his claws."

"We don't know anything about his claws."

"Agreed; they are sheathed in velvet just now. But he has shown them to Lady Gibson, and if we watch he may show them to us. Then we shall know what to do. Understand?"

"Oh, yes! and I am of your opinion, Miles. Yet we have nothing substantial to urge against Hurst. There is no evidence——"

"We must find evidence. I tell you, Toby, I don't feel easy in my mind over Melicent's position with that man. I only hope she'll stay where she is."

But the hope was vain, and Darch learned that it was very speedily. He went on talking to Toby and suggesting schemes to counter-plot Ralph when Melicent made her appearance. It was so sudden and so pat to the moment as to be quite dramatic,

and both the young men could not conceal their astonishment. Miles placed a chair for the girl, who looked weary and sick. Toby, as a medical man, told her so the moment she sat down. Melicent nodded.

"I'm worried about something," she explained.

"I know," said Darch, leaning against the table; "and you have three times refused to tell me what that something is."

"I can't." Melicent turned away her face.

"Sylvia doesn't want you to tell, I suppose?"

"Sylvia!" the girl stared and grew crimson. "What has she to do with it?"

"Everything, as Toby and I know from this letter." Miles held it up.

"Oh! Is that the letter Sylvia wrote when we returned home after the lunch?"

"Yes; and after she saw her mother."

"Well, she *did* see her mother before she wrote the letter. If that is the letter."

"It is. Toby has been to Paris with his uncle, and only got the letter to-day when he returned. I quite understand why you are worried, Melicent, and also why you refuse to tell me the cause of the worry. Sylvia is going to marry your uncle, and asked you to say nothing about it to me."

"Yes! I suppose I can admit that now you know so much, Miles."

"You have not broken any confidence, dear, if that's what you mean. But be more explicit for Toby's sake. Do you know why he has been cast aside?"

"No," said Melicent earnestly; "really I don't. Sylvia said, after she posted that letter, that she was going to marry Uncle Ralph, but she refused to say why. I suggested that it was because Lady Gibson thought my uncle was rich, and if that had been

the reason I was going to break my promise to Uncle Ralph and explain about the will since I think it's a shame that Sylvia should be forced to marry him when she loves Toby. But Sylvia says it is not a question of money."

"She repeats that in the postscript to this letter," remarked Darch, nodding. "I suppose you don't know why Lady Gibson agrees to this marriage?"

"No; she says nothing and Sylvia says nothing. I'm very miserable, Miles, and I'm not enjoying myself a little bit, I'm sure," sobbed Melicent, taking out her handkerchief. "I didn't mind in the least when Lady Gibson told me this morning that I could go home."

"Oh," Miles glanced at Smith, "she told you that?"

"Yes; she says she is ill and can't entertain me any longer. And she does look ill," asseverated the girl tearfully, "staying in bed ever since Uncle Ralph came to see her. I'm sure dull as the Hall is, I don't mind going back in the least, though I really don't like Uncle Ralph as I used to like him. He's changed somehow since father died."

"And you don't like him?"

"No." Melicent dried her eyes and twisted her handkerchief into a damp ball with a worried look. "I dare say it's very silly, Miles, but I'm afraid."

"Of your uncle?"

"Yes; but don't go on examining me in this horrid manner. I can't bear it."

"I won't, then," said Miles soothingly, for he saw that the girl was overwrought, "only tell me if you came this morning to ask me to take you back to the Hall?"

"Yes, I did. To-morrow I am returning by the midday train. I know it's taking you away from your work, Miles, but I feel that I can't return alone."

"Melicent," said the young man abruptly, "don't be silly. Late events have got on your nerves. Your uncle is all right," Miles swallowed something when uttering this lie. "He loves you just the same, and all the difference in him since your father died is that he dresses in a smarter fashion."

"No ; he is different all through, and I'm afraid of him," insisted Melicent positively. "It's that statue, I'm sure. The hand is closed yet, and there is more trouble to come."

"Oh, nonsense," said the doctor bluntly, for he saw that his friend was trying to reassure the girl, "you are run down. When you come back to Grenacer I'll give you a tonic."

"You're sure that there is nothing to be afraid of ?" asked Melicent in a timid tone wholly different to her usual speech.

"No !" said both young men simultaneously, although they were as afraid for the girl as she was afraid for herself.

"Then I shan't worry any more," said Miss Hurst cheerfully, rising to go, "and I'll expect you at Liverpool Street Station to-morrow, Miles, at a quarter to twelve."

"I'll be there," said Darch, escorting her to the door ; and he kissed her in the passage, while Toby discreetly remained behind so that this loving farewell might not have a spectator.

Miles returned with a gloomy brow. "You see Melicent mistrusts Ralph also, Toby," he remarked, frowning. "I wish she wasn't going back."

"Well, you can keep an eye on her and so can I," said the doctor in a comforting tone ; "and ask Mrs. Frint to look after her."

"Yes ; a good suggestion. Whatever Hurst may be, Mrs. Frint is a good old soul, and nursed Melicent And as she's in the house, she can guard Melicent

from any devil-tricks Hurst may wish to play on her."

"You think, then, that he does intend to play tricks?"

"I am quite sure that Hurst intends to get the property if he can."

"You have no reason for saying that; no real reason, I mean."

"Quite so. All the same, I do say it," and there was silence for a few moments, which was ultimately broken by Toby.

"I say," observed the doctor, who had been reflecting, "suppose we tell the whole of this story to Uncle George. He's a shrewd old chap, and has great experience of the shady side of life, with which Hurst seems to be associated. And Lady Gibson, too, if she has some secret," added Toby.

Miles approved of the idea immediately. "It's worth trying," he said heartily. "I like your uncle, Toby, and think he is very sensible and clever."

"Very well, then, come to dinner this evening. I can give you a bed at the hotel. At least Uncle George can, as he's paying for everything."

Darch accepted, as he thought that, for the time being he could do more good in town than at Grenacer. He wished to be within call of Melicent in case she wanted him unexpectedly, and things just now were so queer that it was quite on the cards that she might want him. So that evening, after giving his small boy half a sovereign to wait until ten o'clock in the office and receive any message that might possibly come from Melicent, Darch went to dine at the Guelph Hotel. Uncle George was glad to see him and, after giving him an excellent dinner, took him and his nephew to a snug corner of the smoking-room. Over pipes and cigarettes and coffee he demanded an account of everything since Toby

had told him that he was to be consulted. The old man listened in silence, and nodded when the story was concluded. He evidently thought that there was something in Darch's doubts.

"There's nothing appears on the surface to make you doubt him, save this coercion of Lady Gibson," piped the ancient, thoughtfully, "but that alone is enough to show that the man is not the clean potato. If he is using a secret in the woman's past life to force her to obey him, he's a blackguard, if ever there was one, and is not likely to stop at anything."

"Do you think he'll hurt Melicent?" asked Miles anxiously.

"As she comes into her property in two months, he might," admitted Uncle George cautiously; "but we'll discuss that way later. First let us talk about the secret. Is it possible that Hurst learned it from this woman, who murdered the Squire?"

"What makes you think that, uncle?" asked Toby in amazement, for he could see no reason for the observation.

"Mam'zel Clarice, according to Hurst, was connected with the French Secret Service, Horace. It's the word secret which makes me connect the woman with Lady Gibson. Mam'zel Clarice may have learned something about Lady Gibson in Paris, which had to do with this secret of her past life."

"But if Mam'zel knew anything detrimental to Lady Gibson," argued Darch, "I am sure she would have told the Squire."

"Perhaps she did on the night that she killed him. But as the Squire was going to marry the daughter and not the mother, perhaps the secret, whatever it was, didn't bother him. Of course," added the ancient cautiously, "it's only an idea of mine. But if Hurst, as you say, lived so constantly

in Grenacer and never went out into the world, I don't see what chance he would have of learning things."

"He didn't cut himself off entirely from the world," said Sm'th quickly. "I know that he used to go to London once a month and sometimes twice, for I met him occasionally in the train. Your idea is rather far-fetched, uncle."

"It is; it is, Horace," admitted Uncle George readily. "All the same, this woman may have known something about Lady Gibson which she found out in Paris, and may have told Hurst about it. What do you think, Mr. Darch?"

"It's a wild idea," said the lawyer thoughtfully. "Still, there may be something in it. But as we can't find Mam'zel Clarice, I don't see how we are to learn anything about the secret—even if she knew it."

"Well, I only suggest the idea, Mr. Darch. I may be wrong and I may be right, for my experience of life has taught me never to be certain of anything. All the same, Mam'zel Clarice is a dangerous woman, and Hurst—from your showing—is a dangerous man. Birds of a feather, you know——"

"But you don't think that Hurst has anything to do with the murder," exclaimed Darch hastily. "He was in London at the time."

"I dare say. No, I don't suggest that. But if you can learn anything about Mam'zel Clarice, I fancy you'll learn something about Hurst also."

"I'll see what I can do," said the lawyer, and went to bed to think over matters, which were more complicated than ever.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE SHADOW OF EVIL.

DARCH'S visit to Toby's uncle did not help him very much to get a grasp of things as they were. The idea that Mam'zel Clarice, through her connection with the French police, knew Lady Gibson's secret seemed, on the face of it, to be improbable. The woman was frivolous, scheming, fond of money, and anxious to make capital out of her daughter's beauty. But Darch saw no reason to think that she was bad, or that she was likely to have a secret known to the English or Continental police. That there was a secret he was sure, since she consented to Sylvia's engagement to Hurst, but that it was a criminal one he doubted. Doubted also if Mam'zel Clarice knew it. How Hurst had learned the truth, seeing that for many years he had lived so secluded a life, it was hard to say. But, at all events, Miles felt confident that Mam'zel had not enlightened him. All the same, he wished he could find the woman and question her. But she had disappeared and was nowhere to be found.

Melicent looked better when Miles met her at the railway station, but a strange objection to returning home had taken hold of her. Certainly she was going back to Grenacer, for she could allege no reason why she should remain away, and moreover had no

other home to go to. She was striving to overcome the fear of her uncle, which had sprung into being since his engagement to Sylvia. For now Sylvia had the engagement ring on her finger and had interviewed her elderly lover. Miles saw by the haunting look in the girl's eyes that she was afraid, and strove to reassure her by making light of her fears.

"You are frightened of shadows," he said jokingly.

"Shadows can be very terrible," she replied quietly.

"Not when they are faced and their shadowy qualities proved, my dear. Do you wish to know what I think of your uncle?"

"Yes," said Melicent, with a tremor which she could not suppress.

"Well, I think he is a man with a fondness for luxury and enjoyment which he had to suppress for want of money. Also—and this is a point in his favour—he has remained in seclusion, more or less, at Grenacer in order to look after your father, who was too debilitated a man to manage things. Now that his task is completed, and the money from the will added to his own small income gives him the means of indulging in his likings, I think he is anxious to come out into the world. He may be fond of pleasure, Melicent, and I think he is, but that does not mean he is bad or dangerous."

"Yet he forced Lady Gibson to——"

"Ah! that is Lady Gibson's story."

"It is the story she told Sylvia," interrupted the girl dryly, "and it must be a terrible one to make Sylvia give up Toby for Uncle Ralph."

"She gave him up for your father."

"I know. But she told her mother, in my presence, that she would not sacrifice herself any longer now that father is dead. Lady Gibson wanted her to marry that Greek merchant, and Sylvia refused,

saying she intended marrying Toby. At the lunch she was quite bent upon doing so. Yet, after the interview with her mother, she wrote that letter. No, Miles. There is something horrible about the matter and Uncle Ralph knows all about it."

"But it doesn't affect you, Melicent?"

"Not directly; but indirectly it does. For if Uncle Ralph is holding a whip over Lady Gibson's head, he may use another whip to me."

"Well, I am near you, Melicent, and if anything happens to make you feel afraid, you have only to send Jum for me. Besides, I shall ask Mrs. Frint to watch over you."

"But she is devoted to Uncle Ralph."

"To you also, since she nursed you."

"Well, I think she is," admitted the girl after a pause. "I'm sure she doesn't wish to see me hurt."

"Melicent! Melicent! There is no chance of your being hurt."

"I don't trust Uncle Ralph," said the girl sullenly.

From this belief Miles could not move her, and he shared it himself, although he made light of the matter to reassure her. All he could do was to tell her that he was at her beck and call whenever she chose to summon him, and this assurance seemed to make the girl feel safer. When they arrived at Serbery station and stepped into the motor-car which Hurst had sent, the soothing aspect of the country and the bright sunshine cheered Melicent greatly. She began to think that she had exaggerated things and was making a bugbear of her uncle, as she had made one of Hecate. By the time they arrived at the Hall, she was quite her old merry, cheerful self, although she shrank back and shivered when Hurst took her in his arms.

"Welcome back, my dear child," he said loudly.

"I have missed you a great deal. Miles, you must

let her have more of my company than of your own, as I shall lose her to you in the long run."

"Well, I can't come over to-night," said Darch, with a smile, "as I am returning to town, and having much work to do, will not arrive home until late. I can come over to-morrow night, I hope, Mr. Hurst."

"Surely, surely!" said Ralph, clapping him cheerily on the back. "I am always glad to see you and you mustn't mind my jokes."

Reassured by the friendly attitude of Ralph towards her lover, and the freedom of intercourse permitted between them, Melicent brightened still more and kissed Miles with a laugh when he went away. Hurst offered the young man the motor-car to take him back to Serbery, but Miles preferred to walk, and said so. Then he turned to go, as Mrs. Frint came into the hall to embrace and kiss her nursling. But at the bottom of the steps, and before the footman could close the door, he turned back. As he thought, Ralph and his niece had gone into the library, while Mrs. Frint was moving towards the passage leading directly into the back part of the house. Miles called her, and she came forward with a look of apprehension which rather puzzled him.

"Mrs. Frint, my cook wants you to give her that recipe for a curry you promised her," he said aloud, for the benefit of the solemn footman; then, sinking his voice, added hastily, "I want to see you privately."

"You shall have the recipe to-night, Mr. Darch," responded Mrs. Frint after a start. Then in turn she sank her voice. "I'll meet you at the bottom of the avenue in ten minutes."

"Thank you; thank you," said Darch, acknowledging, so far as the footman understood, the promise of the recipe, and then really took his

leave, while Mrs. Frint hurried to her room, and the servant closed the door.

On the way down the avenue Miles wondered at her ready agreement to meet him, and the quick manner in which she had adopted his plan of not letting the footman overhear. It seemed to him as though she was prepared to be asked to meet him privately, even though the start she made hinted that the request was unexpected. Darch was fairly puzzled by her demeanour, just as he was fairly shocked by her wan looks. She was thin, wrinkled and old, quite a different woman to the stout, cheerful old dame whom he had known. The absence of her bright dress and many ribbons seemed to change her still more, and the black mourning garb accentuated her miserable looks. She appeared to be burdened with some secret, and as like as not might break down straight away. Darch could not understand the reason for this woeful change.

At the big gates he waited patiently for the housekeeper, and soon saw her hurrying down, with every now and then a backward glance. She seemed to be afraid lest she should be followed, and when she reached the young man, seized his hands and drew him into the wood. More than ever astonished by this behaviour, Miles submitted to be dragged along a narrow path and into a small glade. Here Mrs. Frint released his hand and dropped on to a fallen tree-trunk with a sigh of relief. She wiped her hot face with her handkerchief as she sighed, and spoke hurriedly.

"Here we are, safe for the time being."

"What do you mean?" asked Darch, more and more startled, as much by the restlessness of her manner as the mystery of her words.

"Why did you ask me to meet you?" she demanded, not answering his question.

"Why did you respond to my request so readily?" he said dryly.

"Because I wanted to see you, Mr. Darch. If you had not come to me, I should have come to you." She paused and rocked herself to and fro, breathing deeply and, as it seemed, with an effort. "Why do you wish to see me?" she asked again, and looking up inquiringly.

"I wish you to look after Melicent."

"Why should I look after her more now than I have ever done?"

"Because she is now an orphan, and orphans, Mrs. Frint, need to be guarded."

Mrs. Frint rose and clutched his arm. "What do you know? How do you know?"

"Know what?" Miles stared at her.

Mrs. Frint released his arm and wiped her face again. "It's quite hot here, isn't it?" she said mechanically. "Don't mind me, Mr. Darch. The Squire's death has been a shock to me, for I was much attached to him. I'll look after Miss Melicent, never fear."

"Thank you. And now I shall ask you the question you asked me. Why did you wish to see me?"

"I want to know when you are going to marry Miss Melicent?"

"In a year."

Mrs. Frint bent forward and whispered in his ear. Darch could feel her hot, hurried breath on his cheek.

"Marry her at once," said the housekeeper.

"Why?"

"Because it would be better. She is all alone, poor lamb, and wants some one to love and cherish her."

"She has her uncle," said Miles, with intentional significance.

"Yes," said Mrs. Frint, drawing back; "she has her uncle!"

Darch grew annoyed. She was plainly fencing, wanting to tell something, yet refraining, for some reason, from doing so. "Be frank with me," he implored in earnest tones. "Remember that I love Melicent with all my heart, and that if anything should happen to her, I should never cease to grieve."

"What could happen to her?" asked the house-keeper, wincing.

"Ah, that is what I wish you to tell me."

"If you think that I am going to tell you anything criminal, you are mistaken," said Mrs. Frint roughly. "All I wished to see you about was to advise you to marry Miss Melicent as soon as possible."

"But her year of mourning——"

"Oh, bother the year of mourning," said the woman vigorously. "It's this way, Mr. Darch, I'll be open with you, if you will promise me to keep what I say to yourself."

"Certainly, if what you say isn't dangerous to Melicent."

"Only to her property, not to her body. No," she spoke as if to herself, "I am quite sure she is safe from bodily harm."

"Why should you doubt it?"

"There are things and things, Mr. Darch. But really, I don't doubt it. All I say is that Mr. Ralph has always been a trial."

"Ah, Mr. Ralph!" again Miles spoke meaningly.

"What do you know about him, may I ask?" the woman fired up immediately.

"Nothing, on the face of it, but what is good. Only he seems to have blossomed out into a man of the world since his brother's death."

"He doesn't mean any harm by that," explained

the woman feverishly. "Only you see, Mr. Darch, he was always wild."

"Wild, Ralph Hurst wild?"

"Yes! yes! in quite the usual way, I mean. There is nothing bad about him, you know, but he was always fond of pleasure: wine and cards and pretty ladies, Mr. Darch. He ran through all his money, and the Squire kept him here on condition that he looked after things. When John Frint, my husband, went to America and died there, the Squire didn't appoint another bailiff. He suggested that Mr. Ralph should look after the estate. And he did very well; he has done very well all these years, for I looked after him and the Squire looked after him. People think that the Squire was a fool, but he was not," said Mrs. Frint excitedly. "He was weak and selfish and didn't trouble about things. But he kept an eye on Mr. Ralph, as I did."

"Why?"

"To see that Mr. Ralph didn't make ducks and drakes of things. He was always a spendthrift, and would have squandered the money if the Squire and I had not watched him. He is cleverer than we are; he always was. But we had common sense, and as the Squire held the purse Mr. Ralph was forced to behave himself. And he has—he has. I assure you he is a clever man."

"And now?"

"He is a clever man, I tell you, but his love of pleasure runs away with him, as it has done always. He has been in that library reading and writing and looking after the estate for years and years, only going up every now and then to London to enjoy himself in a quiet way. But now he is free."

"Ah!" Darch grasped immediately what she meant.

"Yes," insisted Mrs. Frint; "he's free to do what

he likes with the money before he hands it over to Miss Melicent. And even then she'll only be an infant in his hands. Marry her as soon as you can, Mr. Darch, and look after the money, or there'll be none left. I have been a servant in this family for forty years, and I don't want to see the Hall sold and the estate cut up. There's no harm in Mr. Ralph, save that he's fond of pleasure and wastes money. He'd kill me if he knew that I talked like this, so don't tell him."

"No," said Miles soothingly, "I won't. And I quite understand why you wished to see me, and drew me to this quiet spot. But I am surprised to hear what you say of the Squire. I always thought that Ralph looked after him rather than he after Ralph."

"It is difficult to explain" said Mrs. Frint with a sigh. "The Squire was always weak in his body, and never seemed to have enough energy to do anything. But he was cleverer than you think, and more far-seeing."

"Surely not when he made Ralph his daughter's guardian."

"Ah, he did that for the sake of peace, as Mr. Ralph was so angry when any other guardian was proposed. But the Squire thought that long before he died Miss Melicent would be married to you, and then she would not require a guardian. But you know how the Squire died unexpectedly at the hands of that miserable woman."

Miles nodded. "I see! Well, I shall try and induce Melicent to marry me at once; but perhaps if she refuses it won't matter much, as she takes possession of her property in two months."

"I told you that she would be but an infant in Mr. Ralph's hands," said Mrs. Frint with a frown.

"Melicent has a will of her own and——"

"Her will cannot stand against Mr. Ralph's will," interrupted the woman, "for he is as clever as Satan himself in many ways. But don't think that he is really bad," she went on anxiously. "It's only his love of pleasure which I speak against."

Mrs. Frint seemed inclined at once to blame Hurst and to praise him, and was evidently distressed at having to speak at all. Apparently she was fond of Ralph, whom she had known from the time they were both children together: she a village girl and he the young gentleman of the Hall. "Don't think he is really bad," said Mrs. Frint again, twisting her handkerchief, "only get Miss Melicent to marry you as soon as possible, so that you can look after the money. Mr. Ralph isn't good, but he isn't bad. And now that's all I have to say. Keep this conversation secret."

"I promise you that, unless it is necessary in Melicent's interest to reveal it."

"It won't be," said Mrs. Frint vehemently. "Didn't I tell you that she is safe from bodily harm. It's only her money that is in danger, and I don't want Mr. Ralph to play ducks and drakes with that, besides getting into bad company with his love of pleasure."

"H'm!" said Darch, "perhaps marriage will cure him of his profligacy."

Mrs. Frint, who was walking away, turned sharply. "Marriage!"

"Yes; don't you know that Mr. Ralph is going to marry Miss Gibson?"

Mrs. Frint's face was already pale, but if possible it became paler. "You ain't speaking truly, are you?"

"Yes, I am. Ask Miss Melicent."

"But Miss Gibson was engaged to the Squire," said Mrs. Frint, in a scared voice, and trembling violently.

"Well, the Squire is dead, so Ralph thinks he has a chance."

"And has he?"

"Not if Miss Gibson is left to her own wishes. She loves Dr. Smith——"

"I know! I know!"

"But her mother wishes her to marry Mr. Ralph."

"That she shall never do." Mrs. Frint's face flushed scarlet and her voice rang out like a bell. "Never, never, never," and with a fierce look she walked away, increasing her speed at every stride until she was fairly running.

Darch, surprised at the way in which she took the news, wondered if there was anything between her and the pleasure-loving Ralph to make her so furious. All the way to Serbery he pondered over this, and also over the advice she gave concerning marriage with Melicent. Undoubtedly Ralph would squander the money if his character was as Mrs. Frint explained; but bad as this hearing was, Miles felt relieved that things were no worse. Melicent at least was safe from bodily harm, as Ralph would not kill the goose that laid the golden eggs. And yet, as Miles reflected in the train, if the goose was killed, Ralph was the heir to the golden hoard. He tried to believe that Mrs. Frint spoke truly, that Ralph was only profligate and not criminal. But he could not help thinking that the man was more dangerous than the woman would admit. She seemed to have a weakness for the scamp, as was shown by her indignation over his possible marriage with Sylvia, and therefore veiled his worst qualities.

"Anyhow," thought Miles when travelling in a taxi towards the Temple, "Mrs. Frint will look after Melicent and will see that she comes to no harm."

After arriving at this conclusion, he set to work, and passed the rest of the afternoon and the greater

part of the evening in dry-as-dust study. He would rather have been digging in his garden under the open sky than employed in law studies ; but it was necessary for him to make a name, and only by hard work could he make one. And, after all, he had the example of Jum to shame him into sticking to his weary task. There was something of the sybarite in Darch's nature which was difficult to conquer. Only his love for Melicent gave him the strength to conquer it.

It was with a sigh of relief that the young man caught the midnight train at Liverpool Street. As he walked along slowly to enter his carriage, another train drew up on the other side of the platform. Crowds of people, mostly holiday-makers who had been to Southend, rushed out of the train and along to the barrier. Miles watched them idly and then, to his surprise, saw Ralph Hurst in the throng with a light overcoat above his smart evening dress, and carrying a bag in his hand. Ralph did not notice him, and of this Miles was glad. But, astonished as he was to see Hurst at this late hour coming to London, he was still more astonished when he saw Jum, in a tweed suit, with a rakish green hat, darting in the wake of the big man. Jum saw Darch, placed a warning finger on his lips and followed the man he was spying on, with the cunning of a Redskin on the death trail.

CHAPTER XV.

ACCIDENTS.

ALTHOUGH Darch was surprised to see Jum in London at such a late hour, he believed that he guessed the reason for his being there. The boy was following Ralph, to watch his doings, and doubtless did so at the behest of Mrs. Frint. Miles bore in mind her lament for Hurst's graceless instincts, and her dread lest he should get into bad company. Therefore, it was probable that she had instructed Jum to spy on him in the hope of averting disaster, should the man's profligacy invite the same. All doubts on this subject were ended by an explanation from Jum himself. Miles went to his chambers as usual next day, and while busy received an unexpected visit from the page. Alert and bright-eyed, in his smart tweed suit and remarkable Tyrolean hat, which was aggressively green, the boy made his appearance. Miles looked up from the brief he was studying, and silently, with uplifted eyebrows, requested an explanation. Jum gave it immediately, in his best English.

"I know you are surprised to see me, sir," he said, twisting his hat in his hands and meeting Darch's gaze honestly, "but, as you came across me at the station the other night, I thought it best to come and explain."

"Why need you?" asked the barrister cautiously, and wondering if there was any hidden meaning in this unsolicited visit. "I have nothing to do with your movements."

"I think Mrs. Frint would like me to explain, sir."

"Have you seen her to-day?"

"No, sir. I stayed in town last night, as you may guess, since I followed Mr. Ralph up by the last train."

"Why did you follow him?"

"Mrs. Frint told me to do so, sir. She also said that you were in her confidence, so I don't mind speaking freely to you."

"And your object?" Darch was still cautious.

Jum was quite frank about his object. "I don't want you to tell Mr. Ralph that I was following him, sir."

"Why?"

"Well, you see, sir, Mrs. Frint having been at the Hall all her life is fond of Mr. Ralph, and doesn't want him to get into trouble. Now he's got money she thinks he will get into trouble, and told me to keep an eye on him. So when he comes to town I come too. But if he knew that, he would send both Mrs. Frint and me away from the Hall. There's no harm in my following Mr. Ralph, sir. It's for his good, and because Mrs. Frint is so kind-hearted."

Miles thought for a moment, and found the lad's explanation reasonable enough. "I shan't say anything," he said, after a pause; "but you and Mrs. Frint must keep me advised of Mr. Ralph's doings. What does he do in town, Jum?"

"He drinks and gambles, and runs after the girls," said Jum concisely.

"A boy of your age shouldn't know anything about these things." Darch was embarrassed as

much by the boy's innocent, steady gaze as by his direct speech, which was delivered quite unemotionally.

"You forget, sir, that I was a street-arab until Mrs. Frint took me to the Hall," said Jum quietly. "And what I don't know of wickedness isn't worth knowing. What I see and hear can't hurt me, sir, as I've learned better."

"From Mr. Ralph?"

"He's been kind to me in teaching me to speak properly and in educating me, sir. Wild as he is, and many faults as he has, I'm not saying anything against him. I want to do the best I can for him, just as Mrs. Frint does, for I owe as much to him as to her."

Jum spoke quite like an old and experienced man, so that the barrister was astonished at his acumen. Evidently he was quite honest in what he said, and was simply doing what Mrs. Frint desired him to do, and was bent upon repaying those who had been kind to him by helping the one to save the other.

Darch nodded his approval when the boy finished speaking. "Has Mr. Ralph returned to Grenacer?" he asked.

"Yes, sir. He went down by the ten o'clock morning train. I should have gone too, but that I wanted to come here and ask you to say nothing. Mr. Ralph likes to be in London at night, and doesn't care for it in the day."

"I quite understand, Jum. By the way, I wish you would look after Miss Melicent and see that she comes to no harm."

"Mrs. Frint told me to do so, sir, and I'm on the watch; so is she."

"Then you think that Miss Melicent *is* in danger?" Darch was startled.

"It's just as well to be on the safe side, sir," said

Jum evasively, for, like the housekeeper, he apparently did not wish to say anything against Hurst. "I'll do what I can, sir. And now I'll go."

"Very good; and if anything goes wrong, Jum, mind you come to me here or at Grenacer to warn me."

"Yes, sir!" and Jum, with a funny, stiff little bow disappeared, leaving Miles much more easy in his mind. With Mrs. Frint and her satellite to look after Melicent he believed that she would be quite safe.

For the next two weeks things went on much the same. Ralph journeyed up to town as usual, and Jum followed him regularly. At times he went to music-halls, frequented theatres, and haunted drinking saloons. Jum found out that a house in Knightsbridge he visited was a gambling hell, and watched at the door to see him come out after hours of card-playing. Occasionally Ralph paid a visit to Lady Gibson's flat to see Sylvia and her mother, whom he taunted with their inability to escape his tyranny. Of course Jum did not know this, although he shrewdly suspected when he saw the girl's face—Ralph sometimes took her to the theatre—that such was the case. The boy was hampered by his difficulty in following Hurst into houses, but he learned enough of the man's doings to assure the broken-hearted Mrs. Frint that Ralph was going downhill as fast as he could. One would have thought that this concentrated dissipation would have ruined the man's health, but his long years of seclusion in the library had given him much reserved strength, and he showed no signs of breaking up. Melicent was far from suspecting that he led so disgraceful a life, and, as he treated her with every consideration, and was altogether his old kindly self, she began to laugh at her fears. No one was more

agreeable than Ralph when he so chose to be, and he pointedly endeavoured to make his niece as happy as possible.

"I don't want you to mope," said Ralph on several occasions. "Your father's terrible death has been a shock to you which is difficult to overcome. Let me take you to town, Melicent, and escort you to theatres and such-like."

"Thank you, Uncle Ralph, but I couldn't go to places of amusement so soon after my father's death," she said, gratefully admitting his kind intentions. "You wouldn't do it yourself."

"No, I wouldn't," said Hurst virtuously. "I wouldn't even go to town but that I have to see Mr. Crain, the lawyer, about your property. I shall be glad when I can hand it over to you, my dear. But if you won't seek amusement—and perhaps you are right not to do so under the circumstances—let us do what we can to be happy. Get Dr. Smith and Miles to come oftener to the Hall. We can have some music and play bridge. The Vicar and his wife might come too."

All this attention impressed Melicent, as it was intended to impress her, that Hurst really loved her and wished to make her happy. There were many merry evenings at the Hall, now that the first sorrow over the Squire's death had passed away, and everyone declared that Hurst was behaving like a father to his niece. Melicent gradually got over her mistrust of the man, and believed that in some way Sylvia had deceived her about the engagement. She only rarely heard from Sylvia, and the letters were mostly about nothing. No word was said of Ralph and his tyranny, and little mention was made of him at all, so gradually the girl was lulled into a feeling of peace and happiness. Miles was glad to see this, and did not disturb Melicent by

questioning the honesty of Ralph. All the same, he still mistrusted him, and was more watchful than ever. Believing, on the evidence of the postscript, that Hurst had forced the engagement on Sylvia, he could not believe the man to be the kindly, innocent old gentleman he showed himself to be. He thought that Hurst was playing a part, and playing it very successfully, for every one, both high and low, were loud in their praises of Ralph's kindness to his niece and to the household generally. What Mrs. Frint thought Darch could not learn. She never said anything more to him and avoided him always. The barrister questioned Jum, but he was loyal to the housekeeper and pretended that he knew nothing. All the same, Darch felt certain that the lad knew a great deal.

Melicent nearly met with a bad accident at the end of the fortnight which had elapsed since her return to the Hall. She was about to descend the staircase when her foot slipped on a pea, and she just saved herself by clinging to the banisters. Astonished that a pea should be in such a place, the girl knelt down and found that there were many, not only on the landing, but on the stairs themselves. These were polished, and the stair-carpet, from long use, was very worn, so if she had not stumbled at the top, she would probably have slipped on the peas and fallen headlong down the stairs. A broken neck would certainly have been the sure result. Her sudden cry of astonishment brought out her uncle, who was in his library.

"What's the matter, child?" he asked, looking up the stairs.

"Peas are the matter," said Melicent, still holding on to the banisters, for although she had slipped down to kneel and make her examination, she had

not let go, very wisely. "The stairs are strewn with peas."

"Dear! dear!" Ralph ran up cautiously, not wishing to fall himself. "How very dangerous. Who dropped these peas?"

"I don't know."

Hurst frowned and returned to the library, asking Melicent to follow him. He rang the bell for Mrs. Frint, gave her orders, and shortly all the servants appeared to be asked searching questions. Every one of them denied any knowledge of the peas, until Jum stepped forward to be examined. In a doleful voice and with some tears he admitted that he had bought a pea-shooter in the village and a bag of peas with it. In his hurry when coming down the stairs he must have dropped some of the peas. He was very sorry; he would not be so careless again, and by meekly submitting to a scolding he strove to mitigate Hurst's righteous wrath.

"You're a young monkey," cried Ralph angrily. "Miss Melicent might have slipped and broken her neck, thanks to your carelessness. I have a good mind to send you back to your slum in London."

"Oh, don't do that, sir," pleaded Mrs. Frint, who looked more haggard than ever, "for I'm sure Frederick will never do it again."

"I'm sorry; I'm very sorry," whimpered Jum, thrusting his knuckles into his eyes. "I'm sure I wouldn't hurt Miss Melicent for the world."

Then the girl herself pleaded for the culprit, and with some difficulty induced her uncle to overlook the matter. "He's only a boy, Uncle Ralph, and boys will make mistakes."

"This mistake might have cost you a broken neck, or at the least a twisted ankle," said Hurst severely. "However, since you ask me, I have no wish to be

hard on the boy. Jum, go and pick up the peas, and thank your stars that Miss Melicent is so forgiving. Remember, all of you, that now my brother is dead I am responsible for the safety of my niece. Now go."

The servants, with Mrs. Frint at their head, departed thankfully, for they had never seen Ralph in such a rage. Jum picked up the peas at once, but had a bad time in the kitchen for having brought trouble on his fellow-servants. So the incident passed off all right, and in a few days was wholly forgotten. Frederick Marr was overwhelmed with sorrow at his carelessness, and threw away his pea-shooter when Mrs. Frint ordered him to do so. She scolded the boy herself very thoroughly.

Although the nipping autumnal air of early September was making itself felt, the weather was still bright and sunny. Melicent spent a great deal of her time in the garden, taking her fancy-work and a book to some favoured spot for an hour or so. One seat she particularly liked was placed under a large elm-tree on the verge of the lawns, spreading greenly before the front of the great mansion. Here the girl could see the beautiful old building to great advantage, a vast expanse of blue sky, in which white pigeons whirled, and the brilliant colours of what flowers remained in bloom at this late season of the year. Ralph noticed that she frequently sat here and objected to her doing so.

"Elm trees are treacherous, Melicent," he warned her gravely. "Their boughs fall when least expected. Don't you think so, Miles?" he asked the young man, who happened to be present.

"Well, yes," said Miles carelessly, and not attaching much attention to the warning. "They make

coffins of elm wood, so I suppose the tree is always trying to kill people in order that the coffins may be filled."

"What a horrid remark," said Melicent with a shiver. "But my elm-tree is all right. I've never seen a bough fall from it."

"That doesn't say that a bough will not fall," retorted her uncle sharply. "Find another place to sit in."

Out of sheer contrariness Melicent would not, and still continued to take her work and her book to the seat under the mighty tree. But, as afterwards was proved, Hurst spoke truly. Only two days after the conversation the catastrophe happened, and it would have been a terrible one but for the cleverness of Jum. Evidently repentant of his folly over the spilt peas the boy haunted Melicent's steps, attending to her in every way, and rather worried her with his persistent civility. The girl was seated as usual in her favourite spot, reading and sewing, when Jum issued from the house with a glass of milk on a tray. For the last hour he had been lurking in the house and out of the house with his eyes on his young mistress. So that he might approach her the more nearly he invented the excuse of bringing her the glass of milk on the plea that she might be thirsty. Melicent looked up and saw him coming, then bent over her work again. But from this she was aroused by a yell from the boy, and looked again to see him writhing on the ground, the tray fallen from his hands and the milk spilt.

"Oh, miss, miss. Come and help me; come and—oh—oh—oh!" he pressed his hands to his stomach.

Alarmed by the sight and the sudden screams of the boy, Melicent rose in a hurry, letting fall her book and fancy-work in order to fly to Jum's assistance.

Scarcely had she passed from under the shelter of the elm when a gigantic bough crashed down on the very place where she had been sitting a moment before. Had she remained an instant longer she would have been a dead woman, or at least terribly injured. With a gasp of thankfulness that she had escaped the danger, Melicent hurried up to Jum, only to find him on his feet again, white as a sheet, but very much relieved.

"It's all right, miss," he said, getting his breath back; "there is nothing the matter with me. But I saw the bough bending, and pretended to be sick so as to get you from under the tree."

"Oh, Jum!" Melicent took the lad's hand and pressed it, "you have saved my life I really believe," and she looked at the enormous branch with a shudder. "How awful!"

"Well, I nearly killed you with those silly peas the other day, miss," faltered Jum, quite overcome, "so I'm glad I've had a chance of making it up. Oh, here is Mr. Ralph, miss! He will be glad to know you are safe."

"Mr. Ralph! He's gone to the vicarage," said Melicent, turning.

But it was Ralph, as Jum said. He had been to the vicarage, as it appeared, and was returning up the avenue when he heard the piercing cries of Jum and the loud crash of the fallen bough. With a startled face he came running round the corner on to the lawn, apprehensive that something terrible had taken place.

"Child! child! what is the matter?" He hastened to take his niece in his arms and looked from her to Jum, from them to the fallen bough. "Oh!"

"Yes, uncle," said Melicent, who now felt terrified, queerly enough, seeing that the danger was

over. "I might have been killed by that bough but for Jum. He pretended to be ill and I ran to his assistance just as the branch fell. Oh!" Melicent shuddered, "how lucky I didn't wait."

"You would have been dead by this time if you had," said her uncle grimly. "So now you will perhaps obey my instructions and not sit under elm-trees again. Foolish child, to disregard my warning."

"I'll not do it again," said the girl, pale and quivering, for the shock of her narrow escape had shaken her, "but thank Jum, uncle. He saved me."

"Jum, I am pleased with you." Hurst patted the boy on the head. "I had to scold you the other day, but you have made amends; you have made amends."

"I'm only too glad to have saved Miss Melicent, sir," said Jum thankfully.

"Well, there's ten shillings for you, though money can't repay you for saving my niece's life. Melicent, Melicent," he turned to take the girl's arm and walk towards the house, "I wish you would marry Miles at once and relieve me of the responsibility of looking after you. This is the second time within the last week you have been in danger of death."

"It's my own fault," admitted Melicent penitently; "you warned me against sitting under the elm."

"Well, don't be so foolish again. Go in and lie down, my dear, while I have a look at this fallen branch."

Melicent meekly did as she was told and went to her room. When she came down two hours later the branch had been chopped up and taken away. Only a jagged protruding limb of the tree showed where it had broken off. But the girl never sought

that seat again, and indeed, after the accident the seat itself was removed by her uncle's order. He repeated, and very truly, that elms were dangerous trees to sit under.

There was no doubt that Melicent's narrow escape on this occasion made her nervous, and it was small wonder that she should be so, as Miles told her when he heard the story. He made the girl promise to be more careful for the future, but made no other comment on the matter which, after all, was one of those untoward accidents which will happen at times. Melicent obeyed him and was watchful of herself not to sit or stand in any dangerous place. The concentration on this point—the point of avoiding possible danger—made her ill and worried her considerably. She retired early to bed for the next three nights and benefited by long, dreamless sleeps. That is, for the first two nights, her sleep was undisturbed. But on the third night she wooed slumber in vain. Again and again she tried to get rest, but still felt wakeful. Finally, towards the morning, she closed her eyes and slipped off into an uneasy dream-land. How long she slept she did not know; what were her dreams she could not tell save that they were unpleasant. But all at once she woke with a feeling that some one was in the room. With a terrified start she opened her eyes, to see a tall, dark figure standing beside her bed. As she had locked the door before retiring to rest, and no one could have entered, she believed that she was looking at a ghost. And the faint light of the growing dawn stealing in through the window—for the blind was up—showed her that the face of the ghost was that of Mam'zel Clarice. There she stood, draped in a long, loose mantle, looking pale and evil. As the girl gazed at her, spell-bound, the ghost—if it was one—bent forward to whisper in soft, sibilant tones :

“Go away ; go away from here. There is danger, danger, danger !”

The sight of that ghastly face so near to her own, the hissing whisper, and the lonely circumstance of the room at dawn, was too much for Melicent's nerves. She fainted straight away. When she came to herself it was broad daylight ; the door was still locked, and the room was empty.

CHAPTER XVI.

MRS. FRINT'S ADVICE.

RALPH laughed loudly at his niece's story, which was natural enough, considering how fantastic it really was. He declared that she must have been dreaming, since by her own showing she had locked the door of her room overnight, and no one could possibly have got in. But Melicent insisted that she had actually seen Mam'zel Clarice, and that she must be concealed somewhere about the big house. Hurst, finally impressed by her persistence, sent for the servants, who came rather sulkily to the library. They were always being summoned and examined, so naturally were growing rather tired of the atmosphere of suspicion which engendered constant cross-questioning. First they were heckled over the murder ; then about the affair of the spilt peas, and now they were being put in the witness-box in connection with the possible reappearance of Miss Brown. But this last examination, having a ghostly flavour, rather interested them, although they were markedly afraid. The idea of a haunted house scared them considerably.

One and all declared that they had seen nothing of Mam'zel Clarice ; they had heard nothing of her ;

and that there was nothing to show that she had been near the place. Two or three of the domestics gave notice, saying they did not intend to remain in a haunted house, and there was quite a commotion over the whole affair. When the servants left the library Hurst turned towards Melicent with an angry look, and scolded her more thoroughly than he had ever done in his life.

"You see what a lot of trouble you are bringing on us," he said severely. "I wish you hadn't told this cock-and-bull story."

"My story is perfectly true, Uncle Ralph," she retorted doggedly.

"It was a dream. No one could have got into the room when the door was fast locked. But by telling this ridiculous tale you have made the servants believe that the Hall is haunted. We shall have a perfect exodus."

"I can't help the servants being silly, Uncle Ralph. And if they go we can get others."

"Not easily. You know how superstitious the people are round about this place. No one will come, and then we'll be in a nice pickle. You and your ghost."

"I never said it was a ghost," protested Melicent, with tears in her eyes, for Ralph's manner was very severe; "and I don't believe it was one. That woman came and spoke to me."

"What did she say? You never told me."

"She said that I should go away; that there was danger."

Hurst turned away hastily and went to poke the fire vehemently. "I never heard such rubbish. What danger can there be in your own home?"

"She said that there was danger," repeated the girl insistently, "and she repeated the word three times. As it's Saturday and Miles is at home I

have sent for him. He'll be here soon, and he won't scoff at me as you are doing."

"My dear child, I am not scoffing at you. I only want you to talk sensibly."

"I am talking sensibly. Have the house searched."

"Because you imagine things? Melicent, don't be silly."

The girl, who was losing her temper, might have replied hotly but that Miles entered at the moment. He had come over immediately Jum brought Melicent's message, and was relieved to see that she was all right. The girl told him what she had told her uncle, and Hurst repeated his objections to believing so preposterous a tale. Miles was inclined to doubt Melicent's narrative also, since it was impossible that Mam'zel Clarice could have remained concealed in the house for so long without being discovered. But a glance at the anxious face of the girl made him apparently accept what she said as true, and he suggested that Hurst should do what she asked.

"Send to Serbery for Jupp and have the house searched," said Darch seriously.

"Then you believe this silly story?"

"Well, Melicent is not an imaginative girl, as a rule, and she has no reason to invent things."

"But the door of the bedroom was locked."

"Mam'zel might have come in some other way," said Melicent sullenly.

"Down the chimney, or in at the window, which is many feet from the ground, you silly girl. Nonsense."

"There might be some secret door or sliding panel in this old house," said Darch reflectively; "and we know that the Hall is hundreds of years old."

"I know every inch of the Hall," said Hurst

crossly. "And as I have lived here all my life long I would know if there were secret doors and panels. However, let us ask Mrs. Frint. She knows the place just as well as I do, and even better."

So Mrs. Frint, in her black gown and with her sorrowful, wasted face, was called in. She said that she knew of nothing secret about the Hall, and that, so far as she was concerned, she believed that Miss Melicent had seen a ghost by her bedside. This declaration brought Hurst's wrath down on her.

"You silly old woman, you were always superstitious," he said angrily, "and to prove how ridiculously you are talking, I'll agree to Melicent's absurd suggestion and have the Hall searched from cellar to attic."

"And if you find nothing, Mr. Ralph?" asked the housekeeper tartly.

"Then I'll believe that Melicent was dreaming. Ghost indeed; as if a ghost ever existed out of Christmas stories."

"I agree with you, Uncle Ralph," said Melicent positively. "There are no such things as ghosts."

"Oh, Miss Melicent, when you have seen one with your very own eyes!"

"It wasn't a ghost, Frint, but the woman herself!"

"Well, we'll settle the question." Ralph walked to his writing-table and dashed off a note, which he put into an envelope. "Frint, have this taken over to Inspector Jupp at Serbery at once."

Mrs. Frint took the letter and walked out. She still held to her opinion, and turned at the door to deliver it again. "You'll find nothing and no one, Mr. Ralph," she said, shaking her head; "it's a ghost."

When the housekeeper left the room Melicent would have again talked of the matter in hand, but Ralph refused to listen. "Jupp will be here in an

hour or two," he said irritably, "and I don't want to say anything or hear anything until he has made an official search. Miles, I really wish you would marry Melicent at once. She's getting on my nerves. There is nothing but trouble in connection with her."

"It's not my fault, Uncle Ralph. Blame Hecate, for her hand is still closed."

"That's another of your superstitions," he retorted angrily, "and one which has been explained away. Mam'zel, according to Jupp's theory, bent the leaden fingers of the statue into the shape of the clenched fist before she climbed that wall to stab your father. I told her the idiotic legend of the image when she first came here. I do wish you'd marry Miles."

"I'm ready to marry Melicent within twenty-four hours, if she likes," said the young man eagerly.

"Perhaps I'll agree," said Melicent, tossing her head. "I don't want to stay where I'm not appreciated."

Ralph's face fell perceptibly when she said this, and Miles saw it fall. He believed privately that the man was bluffing and that, far from wanting his niece to marry, he would prevent the ceremony from taking place if she showed a desire to agree with him. However, Hurst said nothing, and soon resumed his usual expression of countenance, waving the two young people out of the library as he did so. They left the room willingly enough, as they had much to say to one another. And Miles particularly wished to get Melicent to himself.

"My dear," he said gravely, and when they were walking in the garden, so that no one might overhear, "I wish you'd do what your uncle suggests, and marry me at once."

"My father has been dead only two months, Miles."

"I know; and that is why your uncle suggests our immediate marriage."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that he knows you would not agree to it."

"But Uncle Ralph wants me to marry you so that he can be free to marry Sylvia," said Melicent, amazed by his speech.

"If your uncle marries Sylvia he will have to leave the Hall," said the young man sharply; "and even if he doesn't marry her, I don't want him to stay hanging round here when we become husband and wife. Therefore, as he would lose his home, he wishes to prevent our marriage. Did you see the look on his face when you said that you might fall in with his suggestion, Melicent?"

"No; don't be hard on uncle, Miles, and try to put me against him again."

"I am not trying to do that. I said nothing to make you fear him."

"No," admitted the girl frankly, "it was because I thought he coerced Sylvia into getting engaged to him that I was afraid. But perhaps Sylvia has not been quite open with me, and her mother may be at the bottom of things. I am not afraid of Uncle Ralph now. He is always kind and thoughtful."

Miles was embarrassed. He felt confident that Hurst did not mean well by his niece, but did not wish to alarm her unduly. The girl had been shaken by her father's murder: shaken by the suspicions she entertained of her uncle, which she had now overcome; and now she was shaken by the reappearance of Miss Brown either in the spirit or in the flesh. Darch felt that if he spoke too plainly she

would probably become hysterical. So he curbed his desire to be frank and tried to argue her into an immediate wedding. Only in that way, he silently believed, could he secure her safety. But although he spent over an hour in talking the matter out Melicent refused to agree. She still had a haunting feeling that she had been an undutiful daughter, and so wished to show respect to her father's memory by refusing to accept what she most desired. In her own heart she wished to marry Miles at once and put an end to all the trouble which had taken place since Hecate first closed her hand. But an overstrained feeling of remorse prevented her from indulging in this desire.

In due time Inspector Jupp arrived, with two detectives in plain clothes, and was greatly excited by the summons he had received. He scouted Mrs. Frint's idea of a ghost, and agreed with Melicent that she had seen the missing woman as a real flesh and blood person. As to Hurst, he declared that the whole thing was due to his niece's vivid imagination and constant brooding over the murder. He was certain that Jupp and his myrmidons would find nothing, but gave them full permission to search the house. This they did with zeal.

From the cellars to the attic they searched, and made a particular examination of Melicent's bedroom. The great mansion was a queer, rambling, ancient structure, some of it excessively old, and other parts comparatively modern. There were many rooms which led into one another; narrow passages which led to nowhere and odd little stairs all over the place. Sometimes they had to step up to a room; sometimes they had to step down into a room, and found so many queer twistings and turnings that the Inspector became quite bewildered. It was a rabbit warren of an house, in which any-

one could have hidden successfully, and this idea made Jupp still more zealous in his search for Mam'zel Clarice. He knew that if he found her, great glory would accrue to him, as a zealous and efficient officer of the law. But nothing came of his efforts, or the efforts of the detectives, assisted though they were by Melicent, her uncle, Miles and Mrs. Frint. They all rapped at panels, took down ancient pictures, shook old draperies, and tested the floors. Some strange hiding-places they certainly did find, but these were empty, so in the end Jupp had to confess himself beaten.

"I'm afraid I must agree with your uncle, Miss Hurst," he said disconsolately; "you had the nightmare."

"I had not," she denied crossly. "I was as wide awake as you are at the present moment and much more sensible. How the woman got into my room I do not know, but she was there right enough."

"If she was in the house, we should have found her," said the Inspector. "We have searched every hole and corner."

Ralph laughed. "Nothing will convince my niece that the woman is not in the house," he said loudly. "So suppose—with her consent, of course—we burn down the place. Then Mam'zel Clarice, if she is hiding, will have to come out."

"It's all very well laughing, Uncle Ralph, but I hold to my story."

"A nightmare, Miss Hurst, believe me," said the Inspector indulgently, as he stepped into his motor and signed that the plain-clothes detectives should take their seats. "If she appears to you again, lay hold of her, and let me know. Nothing would give me greater pleasure than to bring her to book." and he drove away, laughing.

"Well, my dear," said Hurst, when the car whizzed out of sight, "we've had enough of this, I think. I'm going to have a quiet read in the library; and you can talk to Miles. Walk in the garden; it will charm away your fancies."

Out of sheer contradiction and because he spoke so scoffingly, Melicent refused to return to the garden with her lover. "We'll go to the Sanctuary, for the gloom of that just suits my feelings at the present moment."

Hurst shrugged his huge shoulders. "You'll have your hands full of a wilful girl when you marry Melicent, Miles," he said, with a laugh, and stalked away.

Mrs. Frint, who had preserved a rigid face throughout the search, listened with open ears to this harmless conversation. When Hurst retired into the library, she made sure that he was within and settled to an hour's reading, by listening at the door. Then she took her way through the hall, along the passage and into the Squire's study. The lovers were walking in the Sanctuary, with their arms round one another, looking up every now and then at the gigantic figure of Hecate glooming in the sunshine with her clenched fists and sinister face. She looked like an evil spirit threatening the young people with disaster. And indeed, she had brought disaster on them very heavily as it was.

"Miss Melicent," called out Mrs. Frint, stepping out on to the terrace, "I want to speak to you and to Mr. Darch there."

"All right," said the girl carelessly, while Miles looked up with sudden interest. "Come and sit down on the terrace."

"You and Mr. Darch can sit, miss. I'll stand," said the woman, and descending the steps, took

up her position before them. "Tell me again what the ghost said to you, Miss Melicent."

"It wasn't a ghost, Frint," was the impatient reply, "it was really and truly Mam'zel Clarice."

"Well, have it your own way, Miss Melicent. Only tell me again what she said?"

"She said that there was danger here and that I should go away."

Mrs. Frint nodded. "And you will obey?"

"No. Why should I?"

"If there's danger, it's just as well to get away from danger," said the woman, with a sombre light in her eyes. "Take the warning, miss, and go."

"But where can I possibly go to, Frint. This is my home."

"Marry Mr. Darch at once, and he'll make another home for you."

"But why should I?" asked Melicent, looking impressed by this persistence.

"Because the ghost advised you to get away from danger."

"Is there danger really, Mrs. Frint?" asked Darch anxiously.

"Miss Melicent nearly broke her neck when she slipped on those peas. She only escaped the fall of that bough by a miracle. I should think there was danger. Go while it is time."

"But those were accidents," said Miss Hurst uneasily.

"Arranged accidents," corrected Mrs. Frint grimly, "and more will be arranged if you don't run away."

Miles jumped up, horrified, to find his worst suspicions confirmed in this way. "Do you mean to say that Mr. Hurst——"

"I say nothing of him," interrupted the house-keeper, turning on him fiercely, "and you know

that I never have said anything. All I do say is that a nod's as good as a wink to a blind horse. Don't be a fool, sir, and let Miss Melicent have her own way. Bundle her neck and crop out of this house and drag her to the altar if she won't go otherwise."

"Frint"—Melicent was on her feet also by this time, and gasped with rage—"I never heard you speak like this before."

"You hear me now," said the housekeeper significantly.

"How dare you ; how dare you ? "

"Because I'm fond of you, Miss Melicent, because I nursed you, because I want to see you happy and"—Mrs. Frint dropped her voice—"safe."

"Melicent, take Mrs. Frint's advice——"

"The ghost's advice," interposed the woman icily.

"And marry me at once," finished Miles. "You are not safe here."

"Who is not safe here ? " inquired a bland voice, and the three turned to see Ralph standing at the door of the study. His voice was calm and bland, but his great red face was convulsed with rage. Mrs. Frint gave a cry of alarm when she saw his furious looks, and he turned on her with a snarl. "You may well cry out, you shameless woman. I have listened to your talk about Melicent leaving her home. You listened at the door of the library, thinking I was safe for an hour, while you poisoned my niece's ears. But I heard you, I followed you, and I have been listening to everything. Frint, you shall pack up to-night and go to-morrow, bag and baggage."

"I refuse," said the housekeeper in a frightened whimper.

"You can refuse or not, as you like, but out you

go. I've put up long enough with your silly talk, and poisonous hints."

"Uncle Ralph," cried Melicent with great spirit, "Frint is my servant, not yours. She shan't go," and Melicent stamped, with her eyes flashing angrily.

"Hold your tongue," said Hurst brutally.

"Gently," interposed Darch, his colour rising, "gently."

"Don't you meddle."

"Oh, but I shall. Melicent is engaged to marry me, and——"

"She shall never marry you," declared Ralph furiously.

Miles sprang up the steps so suddenly that Hurst fell back a step or two into the room, thinking he was about to be struck. But the young man, although his fists were clenched, kept his temper admirably, and he faced the bully very calmly. "She shall marry me, and you shall behave properly to her until she does marry me."

"I'm Melicent's guardian, and I'll do what I like both with her and this fiend of a Frint. You hear, Frint. Out you go."

Melicent threw her arms round the woman. "She shan't go."

"She shall, and you'll go to your room until I send for you."

"Stop it, Hurst," said Darch firmly. "You're not going to behave in this way towards my future wife. If Melicent is wise she will come with me, now that she sees you as you really are, and not what you have pretended to be for so many lying years."

"I shall stay here," said Melicent, whose blood was up, "and I'm quite able to face you, Uncle Ralph. I'm not afraid of you. Frint shall stay,

and I shall act just as I please. Miles, you can go now. Come back to-morrow morning." Then, when he hesitated, she added, "I'm quite safe."

"Very good," said the barrister, although he was reluctant to leave her. "But you understand, Hurst, that if anything happens to Melicent I shall hold you responsible. There must be no more"—he brought his face close to that of the angry man—"accidents."

Hurst turned white, stared at Miles, and then walked away in the silence, opening and shutting his hands as if he wished to strangle the three of them. And it is tolerably certain that he did so wish.

CHAPTER XVII.

DIPLOMACY.

IT might be thought from Darch's opinion of Hurst's character, which was confirmed by the man's outbreak, that he would be afraid to leave the girl he loved in the power of such a scoundrel. But the barrister knew very well that scoundrels value the safety of their own skins, and therefore, this particular scamp, knowing that he was suspected, would be cautious how he acted. The accidents, on the authority of Mrs. Frint, Miles believed to be no accidents, but well-planned schemes to get rid of Melicent. That the first had not succeeded was due to Providence; that she had escaped the danger of the second was due to Jum's quick wit. But Miles did not think that Hurst would risk setting further traps, since he now knew that if anything untoward happened to his niece, he would be brought to book. This being the case, Darch had no hesitation in allowing Melicent to remain at the Hall.

All the same, he was anxious, and felt relieved when Jum made his appearance to inform him that Melicent was quite well. It was Sunday, and the boy was dressed in his best to go to church, where he sang in the choir. On the way hither he had slipped in to calm the barrister's mind, knowing that he would be anxious. But there was another

thing which incited the lad to call, and that had to do with Mrs. Frint.

"She's gone," said Jum, with his lip quivering and his eyes filled with tears, when Darch asked after the housekeeper.

"Gone!" remembering how Melicent had insisted upon the woman remaining, it seemed impossible that Hurst could have forced her to go. But it appeared that he had compelled her departure, and was evidently a bolder scoundrel than Darch had given him credit for being. "I didn't think he would have gone so far as that," said the lawyer with dismay.

Jum dried his eyes, with a gorgeous red silk handkerchief. "Mrs. Frint's my aunt, sir," he said, unexpectedly.

"Your aunt, boy." This was a revelation to Darch, who had always thought that the page was a mere gutter-snipe, without education, money, home or friends.

Jum nodded. "I never said anything about it before, sir, as my aunt thought it wasn't any one's business but hers and mine. My mother, her sister, sir, was born here, but went up to service in London. She married my father, who was a coachman, and afterwards he drove a cab. But when I was born, father took to drink, and died, leaving my mother with no money. She went out as a cook, sir, and worked hard for years. Then she died and I was left all alone without any one to look after me. I starved, and slept anywhere, and got to sell papers, and run errands. Then my aunt came to town and called at the place in Camden Town where we used to live. She managed to trace me and brought me down to be a page. The Squire knew that she was my aunt, and so he allowed her to have me in the house."

"And Mr. Hurst—did he know?"

"Yes!" Jum stole a searching glance at the speaker. "You don't know *him*."

"I am beginning to know him," said Miles grimly.

"You don't know him," repeated the boy. "You remember that image Nebuchadnezzar dreamed about, sir?"

"The one with the feet of clay?"

"And the head of gold," said Jum rapidly. "That's like Mr. Hurst."

"More clay than gold about him, Jum, I'm afraid."

"He's a strange mixture," said Jum in his old-fashioned way. "Good and bad and bad and good. If you knew—well, sir, I don't want to say anything against him, as he has been very kind to me. And yet——" He hesitated.

"If you know anything about him that I should know, Jum, you must tell me."

"I'll do that, sir. After all, I owe more to my aunt than to him. And he had no right to turn her out of a place where she has been these forty years."

"When did she go?"

"Last night at eight o'clock. Mr. Ralph drove her himself to the Brant station in the motor."

"Why not to Serbery? That is the usual way we all go to town."

"I don't know, sir. He took her to Brant with her bag, saying that he would send on her luggage when she wrote about her address in London. Miss Melicent insisted that my aunt should remain, but Mr. Hurst would make her go."

"Did Mrs. Frint go willingly?"

"No, she didn't, sir. And I'm sure that if she had fought, with Miss Melicent to back her, that Mr. Hurst would have had to give way. But she only wept and said that she had to obey Mr. Hurst."

"Why had she to obey him?"

"I don't know." Jum spoke through his clenched teeth, and his young face grew dark. "But I'll pay him out for treating my aunt so. Kind as he has been to me, she has been kinder. And I know a thing or two, which Mr. Ralph wouldn't like known."

"Tell me, Jum." Darch spoke sharply.

The boy retreated towards the door. "It isn't yet time," he said quickly. "But you'll know soon enough."

"Know what?"

"What kind of man Mr. Ralph really is."

Darch would have asked further questions, but Jum vanished in his usual rapid way, and was out of the house before Miles could lay hold of him. The boy evidently knew something of moment, since he was in the confidence of Mrs. Frint, who was well acquainted with Hurst and his doings. Miles, wishing he could force the boy to be frank, went to see Toby and tell him of the conversation. The doctor was just getting ready to see a patient some ten miles away, and had little time to spare. Darch caught him in the yard, stepping into the motor. Insisting upon his waiting for a few minutes, he related what he had heard from the page.

"What do you think, Toby?"

"I think you had better leave Jum to tell what he knows in his own good time," answered the doctor, drawing on his gloves. "I am as anxious to get at the truth about Hurst as you are, Miles, on account of Sylvia. But Jum is evidently divided in his allegiance. He loves his aunt and he is grateful to Hurst. Let the boy alone, Miles. If you try to force his confidence he may run away to his aunt in London, and then we'll lose the only two people who know the truth about this blackguard."

"Well, perhaps you are right," admitted Darch pondering. "After all, Jum is a sharp lad, and has the sense of a man. But I rather think he inclines more to his aunt than to Hurst, so in the long run he'll side with her. Then he'll let out all he knows."

"That won't be pleasant for Hurst," said Toby vindictively. "There will be trouble when his Bluebeard's chamber is opened. Jum has the key."

"So has Mrs. Frint, if we could only find her."

"Oh, you'll find her, Miles! She'll write to Jum when she's settled in London. Then I'll see her myself and learn, if possible, what means Hurst took to force Lady Gibson into agreeing to his marriage with Sylvia."

"Has Sylvia written to you, Toby?"

"No. I have received no letter since that one saying she intended to throw me over and marry this blackguard."

"What does your uncle say?"

"Nothing, except—wait. He believes that this forced marriage has to do with Mam'zel Clarice and with the murder of the Squire."

Darch uttered an exclamation. "Does your uncle think that Hurst is an accessory before the fact?"

"He won't say. Uncle George is too cautious to say much. But I think he has his suspicions. He's gone to Paris."

"Why?"

"To see the French secret police people and learn all he can about Mam'zel Clarice. Also, incidentally, he wishes to make cautious inquiries about Lady Gibson's secret."

"Oh, that idea of his that the French police know it, is very far-fetched."

"It may be," replied Toby gloomily, and stepping into the car. "Anyhow, Uncle George will learn

all he can about this woman, and one thing may lead to another. You never know. The old man's as bent as I am upon saving Sylvia from this scoundrel."

Toby drove away to see his patient, as the church bells stopped ringing for the morning service. Darch returned to the house, and was half-minded to go over to the Hall and see Melicent, so as to learn exactly what had taken place in connection with the departure of Mrs. Frint. But knowing that Melicent made a point of going to church, especially since the death of her father, and not being anxious for an interview with Hurst, he decided to wait until the afternoon. Then the unexpected happened, for half an hour later, when Miles was pottering about the garden, Hurst himself made his appearance. He looked big and bluff, as usual ; but his bland, kindly air had given place to an arrogant demeanour, which was highly unpleasant. Since his brother's death it was remarkable to see the change in the man. Formerly a gentle old book worm, loved by all because of his sweet disposition, he had become an overbearing man of the world, imperious and dominating.

"I wish to have a few words with you, Darch," he said, pushing open the gate in an aggressive way. "We must understand one another."

"I quite agree with you," retorted the barrister, wondering why the visit was paid, and resolving to make the best use of the opportunity. "Come inside. I am at your disposal for as long as you like."

"Oh, a quarter of an hour will do, Miles," said Hurst, with a touch of his old kindly way, which somehow made him more objectionable than ever.

They entered the sitting-room, through the French window, and Hurst sat down in a comfortable arm-chair with his back to the light. He

produced a cigar-case, and offered it to his host, who had taken a seat opposite to him. The offer was declined, whereat Ralph laughed genially, and lighted a cigar on his own account.

"You won't accept the modern equivalent for bread and salt from me."

"Well, no," said Darch very directly. "I don't trust you."

"May I ask why?" Hurst smoked in quite a composed manner, and evidently had himself well in hand.

"Ask yourself. Remember the scene yesterday in the Sanctuary when you threatened to turn out Mrs. Frint in a most brutal manner."

"I have turned her out."

"So Jum came over and told me."

Hurst's face grew dark and his eyes narrowed. "If that brat comes here telling you what goes on in my house, he'll go too."

"Pardon me, the Hall is not your house," retorted Miles spiritedly.

"For the time being it is. I am Melicent's guardian for the next few weeks; and until I hand over the property I am the master of the Hall."

"I disagree with you. You had no right to dismiss Mrs. Frint."

"Oh, I think I had. The woman was poisoning my niece's ears, and such treacherous conduct requires to be punished. You need not worry your mind over what you call my brutality, Darch. I drove Mrs. Frint to Brant last night, and she went away to London with a good sum of money in her pocket. I have advised Melicent to pension her, so she will be quite comfortable."

"When Melicent is mistress of the Hall, she will ask her to come back."

"Oh, well!"—Ralph made a sign to express his

indifference—"she can do as she likes when she is mistress. I have done my best for her, and if she chooses to believe Mrs. Frint's lies, there is nothing more to be said."

"That depends upon the lies," said Darch coolly.

"What do you mean?" Hurst bent his brows and looked larger and more imposing than ever. But this frog-in-the-fable swelling had no effect on Miles.

"I mean that you are afraid of Mrs. Frint, else you wouldn't have discharged her, as you have done."

"I have explained why I sent her away," said Hurst coldly, "and she went away comfortably. As to being afraid of her, why should I be?"

"You know best, Hurst."

"Pooh! Pooh! You are talking nonsense."

"You know best," repeated Miles, keeping his eyes on the big red face. It did not change either in expression or colour.

"It seems to me, Darch, that you mistrust me," said the man deliberately, "and my reason for coming to see you is to ask why? Is there anything in my conduct towards my niece which you condemn?"

"On the face of it, no."

"Then why condemn me?" asked Ralph, very naturally, and feeling that he had decidedly scored a point.

"I put in the saving clause, 'on the face of it,'" retorted Darch with emphasis. "Mrs. Frint hinted that those accidents were not accidents."

"Quite so, and for saying that I discharged her," replied the visitor with great calmness. "How do you make them out to be other than accidents, I should like to know."

"I admit the difficulty of showing that they were arranged accidents——"

Hurst started to his feet indignantly, and his face became black with rage as he spoke vehemently. "How dare you say that?"

"I dare a great deal in Melicent's interests," said Miles dryly. "You may as well sit down and listen, Hurst. Let us have it out as man to man."

"Good!" The visitor resumed his seat and relighted his cigar, which had gone out. "I am ready to listen, but I warn you that if you attempt to take away my character I shall defend myself."

"You have every right to do so."

"As to the accidents," fumed Hurst, still irritated by the lawyer's veiled accusation. "You know perfectly well that they were genuine enough. That brat of a boy let fall some of the peas he was using for his pea-shooter on the stairs, and Melicent slipped on them. I was very angry with Jum about the matter, and it was my niece herself who begged me not to send him back to London. Am I therefore responsible for that accident?"

"On the face of it, no," said Miles again, and listening intently.

"Then the other." Hurst wiped his red face hastily. "I warned Melicent not to sit under that elm tree. You were there yourself when I did, and I asked your opinion about the same. She *would* sit there, and a bough fell as I thought it might. I was away at the vicarage when Melicent went to sit there, and only returned somewhere about the moment it fell. Did I ask her to sit under the elm at that moment? Did I make the bough fall?"

"On the face of it, no," said Darch for the third time.

"Explain your meaning of 'on the face of it'?"

"I can't. All I can say is that it was strange two accidents should have come to pass so quickly."

"Well, then, your 'on the face of it' really means that in some way, which you can't explain, I brought about those accidents?"

"Yes. That is my meaning." Darch was quite calm as he spoke.

"Oh!"—Hurst grew derisive—"then you think that I wish to kill my niece?"

"I don't say that," answered the young man cautiously, "but you are the next heir to the estate."

"I see," said the visitor dryly. "What a fine opinion you have of me."

"Can I have a good one of the man who is forcing Sylvia Gibson into a hateful marriage by coercing her mother?"

"Coercing her mother," repeated Hurst with a start. "In what way?"

"Ah, I don't know! But Lady Gibson would certainly prefer her daughter to marry Constantine Tahinos rather than you."

"You think so," said Ralph composedly. "Well, then, I shall give you an opportunity of asking Lady Gibson's opinion on that point. In two days she and Sylvia are coming down here to stay. Come over some evening and ask."

"Thank you." Darch promptly accepted the invitation. "I shall be delighted to do so. So Sylvia marries you for love, since you are not coercing her mother, and through her mother, Sylvia herself?"

"I don't say that."

"Then Sylvia marries you for your money, when you have only seven hundred a year, as you told me yourself in the Hall library?"

"I don't say that either."

"What do you say, then?"

"Nothing. I shall leave Lady Gibson and her

daughter to explain. And I may as well tell you that when I make Sylvia my wife, we are going to America."

"Indeed."

"Yes, indeed. In a week I marry Sylvia by special licence. Then I shall surrender my office as guardian to Melicent, since you seem to think that I fill it so badly. She will have her property and her money, which you think I covet. Then she can marry you, and never trouble about me again."

"I see. So that's the situation, is it?"

"Can you ask for a better one?" demanded Hurst, heaving his huge bulk out of the deep chair. "It seems to me, Darch, that I have answered all your questions fairly and honestly. Now"—he raised a big hand with a contemptuous smile—"don't say 'on the face of it' again."

"I am not going to."

"Because you can't. Can you prove that I engineered those accidents, as you implied that I did? Can you say that I have treated my niece badly in any way? Have I denied her liberty, or money, or anything she wanted? Is she starved? Has she been ill-treated? Has she a word to say against me, save that I went against her wishes in discharging that old hag, who was talking in the same silly way as you are doing? Answer me, Darch?"

"I can't. All you say is quite correct."

"Then why mistrust me?"

Miles leaned against the mantelpiece with his hands in his pockets and pondered. "Upon my word, I can't say why I mistrust you," he said frankly and smilingly, "but I do."

"You do?"

"Yes!"

"On what grounds, seeing that I have cleared

myself of everything save that I was rather bad-tempered yesterday ? ”

“ I can't say. ”

“ You are unjust. I have shown you that I have done my best for my niece, that by going to America I do not want her money. That by approving of your marriage I wish her to be happy. What more in heaven's name do you want me to tell you to prove my good faith ? ”

“ I don't want you to tell me anything, ” said Miles, with a shrug. “ All you have told me has been told of your own free will. I am not your judge. ”

“ But by spreading false reports about me, you will make other people my judge, ” said Ralph hotly. “ You are unjust. ”

“ I don't intend to spread any reports, Hurst. What I think, I think, but I don't impart to any one else what I do think. ”

The visitor heaved a sigh of relief and stepped out of the window to walk towards the gate and depart. As Darch followed him, he turned. “ You will come to dinner and meet Lady Gibson and Sylvia ? ”

“ Oh, yes, with pleasure ! After all, the Hall is Melicent's house, and the food is her food. ”

“ I see. Shake hands. ”

“ Thank you, no. We are not friends. ”

“ Then let us be enemies, ” said Hurst, with a roar, and strode away, furiously.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A SURPRISE.

BETWEEN the time of Ralph's unexpected visit and the evening of the invitation to dinner, Darch discussed the conversation frequently with his medical friend. With the exception of the scheme to marry Sylvia against her will, Smith thought that Hurst had cleared his character. Miles did not agree with him.

"Why was there need for Hurst to come here and clear his character?" he asked. "What I thought, or did not think, didn't matter to him."

"Well, I don't know so much about that. You are to marry his niece."

"Quite so. But Ralph's character in the village is so high, and he is so carefully affectionate to his niece, that anything I could say wouldn't matter very much. Unless——"

"Unless what?" asked Toby moodily. He was not particularly interested in the discussion, since his thoughts were concerning themselves with Sylvia's visit to the Hall.

"Now you come to the point," said Miles, with a brisk nod, "unless Hurst is really the devil I believe him to be. If so, he daren't risk the slightest whisper against him, for if suspicion was once aroused, things might come out to incriminate him."

"In what?" Toby sat up to answer. "You can't bring the accidents home to him, and, much as I dislike the man, I think they *were* accidents."

"I don't," retorted Darch stubbornly. "He has been clever enough to engineer them deftly, but they were designed accidents all the same."

"Thinking that, I wonder you allow Melicent to stay at the Hall."

"Oh, she is all right now! Hurst, knowing that I doubt him, won't dare to tamper any longer with Melicent's life. I have seen her three or four times since that scene in the Sanctuary, and she says that Ralph is treating her with every consideration."

"I thought she feared him?"

"She did when in London, owing to his forcing Sylvia into this marriage, as she thought that by doing so he was a bad man. But he is behaving so well now that she has ceased to fear him."

"But Mrs. Frint's warning, and the warning of Mam'zel Clarice, if it *was* her?"

"Those warnings have got Melicent's back up. She fears danger always, but now that she knows danger may come, she is bold enough to face it."

"Then she is not on her old friendly terms with our friend?"

"Oh, yes—outwardly," said Darch in a meaning way. "He is behaving scrupulously well, as I say, and Melicent takes him at his own valuation. All the same, she is on her guard against him and his doings."

"But why does she think he is dangerous, and why do you think the same? There is no proof, since Hurst explained the position clearly enough when he came here. If he really had been plotting Melicent's death, as Mrs. Frint implies, he certainly would not surrender everything at the eleventh hour and sneak off to America."

"That's just it. You've hit it," said Miles emphatically. "Hurst is very much afraid. It was fear that made him dismiss Mrs. Frint, lest she should say too much, and it was fear that brought him over here to explain things and close my mouth. He sighed with relief when I said that I would say nothing, Toby. Depend upon it that, cleverly as he has masked his doings, there is something behind all this diplomacy which means danger to our friend, should it be discovered."

"I wish it would be discovered, so that Sylvia could get away from him. I'll see if I can get her to tell me the truth to-night."

"What!"—Darch looked surprised—"are you going to the dinner also?"

"Yes. Hurst sent a note to me this morning asking me to come. Of course, I know he means to gloat over my misery and rack my feelings by bringing me into Sylvia's company, but I accepted his invitation."

"I wonder why it was given," mused Darch.

"I have told you," said Toby impatiently. "He wants me to see what I have lost; to rub it in, as you might say."

"Would he do such a trivial thing as that?"

"The Lord knows what he would do or would not do, if the fancy took him. I hate the beast, and wish he was in jail or on the gallows. All the same, I can't see that you have any proof against him to show that he is other than he has always been."

"I think Jum could tell a tale of his doings in town," said Miles, with a shrug; "doings that would not be to his credit."

"Pooh! Women and wine and cards. Those are minor sins always condoned by society. Hurst is only sowing a second crop of wild oats."

"Or a crop of hemp out of which will be made the rope to hang him."

"I say! I say! don't go too far, old son. You have no proof that he has done anything criminal. He was away from home when his brother was murdered, and in any case didn't benefit by the death. So there's no motive to——"

"I know; I know," broke in the barrister impatiently. "Ralph is all right so far as we can see, save in his forcing of this marriage. But I tell you, Toby, that I mistrust the man, and that some day we'll find things out which will startle every one."

"No evidence." Toby shook his head. "As a lawyer, you should know that evidence is required before you can condemn a man."

"I know that. All the same, well, it is useless to talk in a circle. But mark my words, Toby, there's more behind all this than meets the eye," and this conversation between the two ended as other conversations had ended, in no conclusion being arrived at.

Of course Darch knew that his friend was right. Hurst had exonerated himself, and if all his actions save that which had to do with Sylvia were made public, no one could say a word against him. It was wholly impossible to prove that the accidents were designed, and the dismissal of Mrs. Frint was natural enough, seeing that she was maligning her employer. It seemed to Darch that the sole method to get at the man in some tangible way was to find out the secret which he used to compel Lady Gibson to consent to his marriage with her daughter. But Uncle George, in Paris, was doing his best to discover that, so there was nothing to be done in that direction by Darch himself. Of course, Sylvia might say something, or Lady Gibson might drop a hint; but this

was unlikely seeing how completely they were under Hurst's big thumb.

However, Miles and Toby went to the dinner in a fairly cheerful frame of mind. Toby, because he would be able to speak to Sylvia, and perhaps rescue her from this hateful marriage at the eleventh hour ; and Miles, because he had Ralph's own word for it that he was throwing up the sponge. Within a week or a fortnight at the latest the man would be on his way to the States, and then Melicent would be her own mistress. That meant a speedy marriage, for Miles resolved to induce her, if possible, to become his wife straight away, in spite of her mourning. And he really believed that she would consent, since she was growing weary of constant trouble. Her wedding would mean that a new leaf had been turned over, and that there would be no more sensational happenings.

Ralph, arrayed in purple and fine linen, and so smartly dressed that he presented a great contrast to his former untidy self, received his guests with boisterous geniality. His ruddy face glowed with pleasure, his eyes sparkled with kindness, and he played the part of a hospitable host to perfection. Lady Gibson, looking pale and worn, quite a shadow of the old days, but nearly as voluble, received both the young men kindly. She seemed to have got over her dislike for Smith, and saw him advancing towards Sylvia without displaying any irritation. Sylvia turned a shade paler, as Toby took her hand, and glanced in a reproachful way at her promised husband. She evidently meant to show her annoyance at this uncalled for pain which he was inflicting. But Hurst smiled all over his big face and accentuated the sufferings of the girl, and indeed of Toby himself.

" Sylvia looks well, doesn't she, doctor ? " he said,

slapping the young man on the back ; " quite the happy bride that is to be."

Smith winced and shot a look at his tormentor, which absolutely hinted at murder, while Sylvia, with an artificial laugh to cover her pain and shame, retreated to the sofa. Ralph's coarse joke offended both her mother and herself, although they did not dare to show their displeasure. It was evident to Darch's observant eye that both women were terrified of their host, and he wondered for the hundredth time what the secret might be. It was just when he reached this point of his reflections that Melicent came into the room. She had not been there when the young men arrived, and only hurried in when dinner was being announced. She looked quite bright and unafraid, running to Miles to kiss him and to tell him exciting news.

" After dinner we must go into the Sanctuary," she said, taking both his hands. " There is a surprise for you there."

" Has Hecate tumbled down ? "

" No ; but she has opened her hand."

All save Hurst, who knew this, exclaimed. " It really must be some trick," said Lady Gibson, fanning herself. " A statue can't open and shut its hand in so human a way. Ridiculous ! "

" Ridiculous or not," said Hurst, beaming. " It is as Melicent says. Two or three days ago we found the hand had opened. I didn't want it known all over the village, as there has been quite enough talk about our family affairs as it is. Therefore, I ordered Melicent not to say anything until now."

" But why do you give her permission now ? " asked Darch, wondering what this new miracle portended.

Ralph shrugged his huge shoulders. " It's bound to become known sooner or later, so I allowed

Melicent to speak, thinking it might be a pleasant surprise to you, Darch."

"Why a pleasant surprise?"

"Oh, Miles, can't you see?" cried Melicent petulantly. "The opening of the hand means that good luck has returned to the family. All our troubles are over, and now things will be all right."

"And how delightful that will be," said Lady Gibson, shrugging in her turn and raising her lorgnette to stare at the host. "How thankful we must be to the person who has put them right."

Ralph looked at her, still smiling, so markedly indeed, that the frivolous little woman shuddered and turned pale under her rouge. Sylvia, standing near, took her mother's hand as if to reassure her, and met Hurst's gaze with haughty defiance. He continued to smile, and rubbed his hands. "Lady Gibson pays me a great compliment in saying that I have put things right. I hope I have. And certainly it is within my power to put them right now by saying that dinner is ready. You must be all hungry, Lady Gibson."

He offered his arm, which she took with a nervous giggle, striving, as Miles saw, to suppress her dislike at having to take it. Darch himself took in Melicent, and the doctor accompanied Sylvia. As the host was engaged to the girl, he should have been her companion, but it was evident that he allowed Toby to be so in order that Sylvia might feel awkward. If she did, she concealed her feelings very well and, coldly smiling, took her seat at the table. Toby, knowing how she suffered, cursed Hurst under his breath, but for the sake of appearances managed to look agreeable. And Melicent was so bright that she seemed unnaturally lively. In fact, Darch thought that every one present was playing a part, and he was quite sure that whatever the others felt,

Ralph's part was the most difficult to sustain. To his mind there was something gruesome about the whole affair.

The meal was everything that could be desired in the way of luxury and refinement. The table was beautifully decorated; the food was excellent; the wines were perfect, and nothing that money could do, or taste could supply, was wanting. Ralph was an attentive host, and kept everything going and every one amused—so far as they could be amused with their various preoccupations—with his conversation. From jokes he came to information about the village and the family.

"Take the name Grenacer," he said expansively. "Gren comes from the Anglo-Saxon *grene*, which means the colour of grass——"

"Green, I suppose," said Darch dryly.

"Exactly; Gren means green. Acer is pure Anglo-Saxon."

"Meaning acre, which is very apparent," said Darch again dryly, for it seemed to him that Hurst was talking about nothing.

"Quite so. Grenacer, therefore, means Green-acre, and doubtless the name was given to the village because of the emerald hue of the site upon which it is built. Also the River Gren really is green at times."

"Or it flows through green banks," volunteered Toby with a shrug.

"Ah, yes! Perhaps that might be the origin of the name. But take our family name. Hurst, Anglo-Saxon for a wood. Thorswud means the wood of Thor, the Norse Thunder god. So our family name and the wood which surrounds the Sanctuary are closely connected. Very interesting, I think."

Darch assented, but to show that he did not wish for unnecessary information, turned to Melicent:

"Why isn't Jum here, as usual?"

"Oh, Jum has gone," she said hurriedly, and glanced at her uncle.

"Yes," said Ralph, having overheard the question and the reply. "I turned Jum away this afternoon, after giving him a good thrashing."

"Why was that?" demanded Miles indignantly.

"He has been behaving badly. I need not tell you in what way. The example of Mrs. Frint has spoiled the boy. I did my best for him, but it has proved to be useless. I wash my hands of Jum. He can now return to his original name of Frederick Marr and go back to his street-life in London."

"Oh, uncle, how can you talk in that way? Think of how Jum saved my life."

"Well, Melicent, shortly you will be your own mistress, and then you can call back both these servants whom I have discharged. I think you will be acting very wrongly, as neither of them is to be trusted."

"I should trust Mrs. Frint and Jum anywhere," said Melicent firmly. "And I shall certainly ask them to return when you go, Uncle Ralph. But I am thinking of poor Jum in the meantime, alone in London."

"Oh, he'll go to Mrs. Frint, his aunt," observed Miles abruptly.

"Aunt!" Melicent looked amazed. "Do you mean to say that Jum is Mrs. Frint's nephew?"

"Yes; he told me so. Did you know, Mr. Hurst?"

Darch asked this question as he saw that the big man—as he thought—was plainly taken aback by surprise. Evidently neither Mrs. Frint nor Jum had revealed their relationship to him. Then all at once Miles began to laugh as he remembered that Hurst *did* know. Jum had confessed as much.

Ralph pounced on him. "Why do you laugh?" he asked softly, but with an evil glance.

"I was thinking that you did not know about the relationship, but I remember Jun told me you did know."

"Yes, I knew, and so did my brother. But for the relationship we should not have allowed that little street arab to stay here. As it is, he has proved very ungrateful, just like his aunt. It's in the family, I suppose. By the way, has Frint written to you, Melicent?"

"No; I have had no word. Do you know where she is, Uncle Ralph?"

"In London somewhere. She will write for her boxes when she is settled, no doubt. But all this," Hurst looked blandly round the table, "must be very dull conversation for our visitors. And as the dinner is ended, I propose that the ladies retire to the drawing-room, where we will join them shortly."

The ladies did retire, Melicent rather indignantly, as she should have been permitted, as the hostess, to give the signal. But on this evening her uncle seemed to be bent upon exercising his authority even in trifles. Also, with all his attempts to make himself agreeable, there was something sinister about his behaviour. Lady Gibson broke down when they reached the drawing-room, and Sylvia led her to the sofa to comfort her.

"Don't, mother," she whispered; "you have borne up so well. Don't give way now, or he will be displeased."

"I can't bear it any longer," wailed Lady Gibson, sobbing. "I wish I was dead and buried."

"Does Uncle Ralph make you wish that?" asked Melicent curiously, for she hoped to force Lady Gibson's confidence and get at the truth.

"Your uncle is a devil in man's shape," said the woman fiercely.

"Mother! mother!" Sylvia tried to soothe her. "That's dangerous."

"Not with me," said Melicent, who was rather pale. "I don't love Uncle Ralph as I used to do, and I think he's a bad man. Why do you marry him instead of Toby? And why do you let her, Lady Gibson?"

"Because I can't help it." Lady Gibson dried her eyes and became more composed. "I wish, with all my heart, Sylvia could marry Dr. Smith, much as I used to dislike him. But he would be better than your uncle. Oh, how terrible things are now!"

"They will be all right soon," said Melicent confidently. "The hand of Hecate has opened."

"Oh, that's rubbish," said Lady Gibson tartly. "And even if it is, how can it help us?"

"As Sylvia is going to marry Uncle Ralph, and he is a Hurst, the statue must help her in some way," insisted Melicent, who was not to be argued out of her favourite superstition. "We've had a lot of bad luck, but now we shall have good luck."

Sylvia, looking as white and calm and lovely as a marble statue, had said little, but she now glanced towards her friend. "I believe you are right, my dear. Good fortune will come to release me from this hateful marriage. I don't believe that God will permit this wicked man to triumph."

"Oh, Sylvia, don't talk like that," said Lady Gibson, quite shocked and in a scared tone. "It sounds dreadful."

Sylvia relapsed into silence, and as the men entered at the moment nothing more was said. For the next hour Ralph took command of things as usual. He made Sylvia play, which she did brilliantly, but unemotionally, not venturing to object. He

induced Melicent to sing, and got Dr. Smith to recite, knowing that his rival had some small talent in this way. Also Hurst sang himself in a big, booming voice, which sounded like the bell of St. Paul's. Only Lady Gibson and Darch refused to contribute to the entertainment, which, for want of heart on the part of the performers, was extremely miserable. But every one save Darch seemed to be hypnotised by the immense energy and dominating spirit of the host.

"Now we'll have some bridge," he bellowed, and was altogether so noisy and aggressively merry that all present wondered if he were mad.

Darch himself was puzzled. He could not understand all this coarse humour, nor comprehend why Hurst was behaving so. More than ever he felt sure that behind all this horseplay there was something terrible, which might reveal itself at any moment. Meanwhile, the bridge-table was set out, and with the others he sat down to play. He had Melicent for a partner, Lady Gibson had Smith, while Ralph, being left out for the time being, forced his odious attentions on Sylvia. The whole situation was uncomfortable, and seemed to be working up to some climax. That came with the entrance of Jum.

"You!" roared Hurst furiously, when he saw the boy. "Why have you come?"

"To bring this lady," said Jum in a loud, excited voice, and pointed to the door.

Every one looked up and exclaimed. In the doorway stood Mam'zel Clarice

CHAPTER XIX.

JUM'S STORY.

SO startling and unexpected was the appearance of Mam'zel Clarice that the bridge-players rose hastily, and in doing so upset the table. Sylvia remained seated where she was, but Hurst had stood up when Jum entered, to turn the boy out of the room. When the woman showed herself in the doorway he was stricken into stone, and halted with a cry. From being red his large face turned pale, and then became a livid grey. If ever a man was frightened out of his senses, Ralph was that man. Darch looked at Mam'zel Clarice and then at Hurst, finally at Jum, for an explanation.

"I found her and brought her here," said Jum succinctly.

Darch had no time to ask where he had found the woman, for at that moment Mam'zel Clarice, whose eyes were wandering vaguely about the room, caught sight of Melicent. With a wavering step she advanced and laid an eager finger on the girl's arm.

"Go away from here," she said tremulously. "There is danger—danger—danger."

"You came to my bedroom to say that," whispered Melicent, terrified by the look of the poor creature and the purport of her speech.

Mam'zel Clarice paid no attention to what was

said, but again let her eyes wander here and there. When they rested on Ralph she started and shivered, staring at him terrorstruck. On his part, Hurst seemed to shrink and dwindle until he became quite small and mean. But he said nothing, even when Mam'zel Clarice pointed her finger at him.

"Danger," she said feebly. "Oh! why did you read the scroll?" and taking a step forward she suddenly gave a terrified scream, throwing her arms hastily round Dr. Smith, who happened to be near her. "Save me, save me, the scroll!" Plainly she was distracted, if not altogether mad, and seeing this Ralph recovered his presence of mind.

"You murdered my brother," he cried, in a high, quavering voice.

But she only shrank from him and clung the more to Smith, who vainly tried to disengage himself from her embrace. "Blood! oh, blood!" she moaned, with her terrified eyes on Ralph. "Save me! save me!" Then suddenly releasing the doctor she flung her arms in the air. "The scroll. Why did you read the scroll?"

"She is quite mad," said Hurst, becoming more himself since no one could make anything of her disjointed ravings.

"So it seems," said Darch dryly. "Hadn't you better look after her, Toby, as you are a doctor?"

Before Smith could speak Ralph stepped forward. "I'll have her seen to," he said, and laid his hand on the woman's shoulder.

As if an adder had stung her she leaped back and, twisting her hands in her hair, which was streaming down her back, she ran shrieking from the room. "Follow her, follow her," cried Hurst, rushing to the door; "we must learn how she murdered my brother."

While Sylvia and Melicent ran to attend to Lady

Gibson, who had fainted owing to the terror of the scene, the men followed Ralph out of the room. Jum, who evidently knew the direction Mam'zel Clarice would take, led the way and sprang up the stairs in pursuit. The woman sped along rapidly, with her hair streaming and her white dressing-gown fluttering. Up the stairs, along the passage, she flew, then climbed another flight, and ran along another passage to disappear into a room in the front of the house. Ralph, who was following Jum, and leading Smith and the barrister, gave a gasp of amazement.

"Mrs. Frint's room," he said, and redoubled his speed.

The three entered the room, Jum having arrived before them, to find Mam'zel Clarice rolling on the bed with the clothes over her head. There was not the least doubt but what she was crazy, for when the boy pulled down the bed-quilt, she uttered loud cries of terror. Smith saw at a glance, from his medical knowledge, what was to be done, and turned to Hurst.

"You and Miles go downstairs," he said roughly. "You can't do any good here. Send up Melicent and two of the maidservants. I'll keep Jum here and scribble a note which he can take to my place. There are certain drugs I require to calm her and send her to sleep. Quick! quick! There's no time to be lost."

"But I want to know," began Hurst nervously, only to be cut short by the young doctor, who was quite master of the situation.

"You'll know soon enough. Do what I tell you, or I won't be answerable for the consequences."

"One word only, doctor. Is she mad?"

"Quite mad," said Smith; "there, that's enough. Go!"

Darch and his host went rapidly down again, and Hurst sent for the two servants who were required. They came hastily, and he told them to go up to Mrs. Frint's room at the top of the house. Puzzled to know why they should, the girls went willingly enough, as much out of curiosity as obedience, for the cries of Mam'zel Clarice had been heard in the kitchen. Just as they disappeared up the stairs Jum came tearing down with a loose sheet of paper in his hand. Darch laid hold of him as he fled past them.

"Give that to one of the grooms," he said sharply. "He can take it over."

"The doctor said I was to go. It's to get medicine," panted the boy, struggling to get free.

"I know. Hurst, get a groom to take it." He plucked the paper from Jum's fingers and passed it to Ralph. "I'll send up Melicent, and take Jum to the library. We must have a thorough explanation of this."

Jum yielded sullenly, overwhelmed by Darch's tone of authority, and Hurst, obedient also for once in his life, went to give the necessary orders. Miles took Jum by the arm and dragged him into the drawing-room, as he wished to see Melicent without losing sight of the boy. Lady Gibson had revived, and was sitting up in her daughter's arms, while Melicent stood beside her holding a smelling-bottle.

"What has happened? oh, what has happened?" cried Lady Gibson when Darch and the boy appeared. "Where is that dreadful creature?"

"Upstairs in Mrs. Frint's room," said the young man abruptly. "Melicent, go up there and put yourself under the doctor's orders. And keep the maidservants who are there from making trouble. We want this business kept as quiet as possible for the present."

"We'll be all murdered in our beds," wailed Lady Gibson, who was terrified and unstrung.

"It's all right," said Darch soothingly. "The poor creature is being looked after, and Smith will give her something to make her sleep. Do go, Melicent. Why are you waiting?"

"Lady Gibson," faltered the girl.

"Sylvia can do what is wanted. Go," said Darch, and said it so sharply that Melicent dropped the smelling-bottle and fled without a word.

"I'll attend to my mother," said Sylvia, who was quite composed. "Mother, let me put you to bed. There is quite enough trouble without your making any more. Come to bed."

"But I want to know where that dreadful woman came from?"

"That is what Jum is going to tell me," said Darch firmly, and led the boy out of the room, while Lady Gibson wailed and protested and fought against Sylvia's entreaties that she should retire to rest.

When Darch and Jum entered the library Ralph was already there. By a great effort of will, he had regained command over his nerves but was evidently considerably shaken by the late scene. He was seated in a chair wiping the perspiration from his white face when the barrister entered with his captive, and jumped up in terror when he saw them. Miles quite expected this exhibition of fear, and smiled sarcastically as he closed the door. Jum kept close to his side and well out of Ralph's reach. He still remembered his thrashing, and was not going to risk another.

"It's all right, Hurst," said the lawyer, "there is no occasion for you to be afraid—as yet," and he laid emphasis on the last two words.

"There's no occasion for me to be afraid at all," said Hurst, with an air of bravado, and again wiping

his face as he resumed his seat. "I don't know what you mean."

"I mean that Mam'zel Clarice seemed to be afraid of you."

"She has every reason to be. I'll have her hanged for the murder of my brother, as sure as my name is Ralph Hurst."

"I don't think the poor wretch is in a fit state either to be hanged or even tried for her life. She is mad. Any one can see that."

"She has lost her memory," said Jum unexpectedly, and with his eyes fixed on Hurst's pale face.

"Has she forgotten that she stabbed my brother?" asked the man ironically.

"She's forgotten everything," retorted the boy positively. "All she keeps on saying is about danger and Miss Melicent leaving the place, and also talks about some scroll she says you read and shouldn't have read."

"What scroll?"

"I don't know," replied Jum indifferently. "That's what she says."

"Then she's mad. I don't know of any scroll, and I don't know either why she should advise my niece to leave the Hall."

"She says there is danger."

"And so there is while she is here—a criminal—a murderess."

"We don't know that yet," put in Miles smoothly. "She has made no confession as yet. And she isn't in a state to make any."

"I don't think a confession is needed," answered Hurst vigorously. "The verdict of the jury, given on all available evidence, is sufficient to hang her."

"Not without a trial, Mr. Hurst; and she isn't in a state to stand her trial."

"Let us hope that Smith will patch her up to

stand in the dock," said Ralph fiercely. "I want to get at the truth of this matter."

"So do we all," rejoined Darch coolly; "and first let us learn how Jum came across the woman."

"I'll tell everything if Mr. Hurst will be friends with me," said the boy, and to the amazement of the two men, burst into tears.

Ralph grew more composed when he saw this. "You don't deserve to have me for your friend, Jum," he said gravely. "You have behaved very badly. I was sorry to thrash you and dismiss you, but you must admit that you deserved to be punished."

"Yes, I did. I was saucy because you sent away aunt. You've been very kind to me, sir, and as I've tried to make amends by bringing Mam'zel Clarice to you, I'll be thankful if you'll forgive me." He moved towards Ralph and fell on his knees. "Do forgive me," he pleaded.

Hurst laid his hand on the boy's head. "Freely. I am not one to bear malice. You have done wrong, but you have been punished."

"And by bringing Mam'zel Clarice here you have made amends, as you say," said Darch, secretly amazed by the boy's submission and wondering what it all meant. "Tell us how you found her, Jum."

"Mr. Hurst has forgiven me, hasn't he?" inquired Jum, timidly rising from his knees. "I'll tell everything if he has."

"You have my forgiveness," said Hurst grandly. "Now tell. Where has this woman been hidden all this time?"

"In my aunt's room."

"Oh!" Ralph stared and frowned. "Then that was why Mrs. Frint changed her room so unexpectedly?"

"Yes; aunt was afraid you would find Mam'zel

Clarice if she remained in her old room, so went up to the garrets, as no one would think of looking in that place."

"Then she didn't change her room to get away from the sight of the statue?"

"No, sir; that was an excuse."

"But where did Mrs. Frint find Mam'zel Clarice?" asked Darch impatiently.

"I don't know, sir. She wouldn't tell me. I only learned that Mam'zel Clarice was in the house when my aunt changed her room. She wouldn't let any of the servants help her to change but me, and hid Mam'zel in a secret cupboard while we took the things upstairs. But I found out, as I was watching my aunt's doings and wondering what she was up to. She made me promise to hold my tongue."

"You shouldn't have done that," said Hurst angrily. "It was your duty to tell the truth at all costs. You should have come to me."

"Aunt said I wasn't to," said Jum, doggedly. "She didn't believe that Mam'zel was guilty."

"On what grounds?" asked Hurst hurriedly.

"Aunt didn't say. But she made me promise to hold my tongue, and no one thought that Mam'zel Clarice was up in the garrets. Aunt took her up food every night and nursed her. She was quite quiet, and only talked nonsense like she talked to-night."

"Doesn't she remember anything?"

"No," said Jum positively, "she goes on talking about danger to Miss Melicent, and the scroll, again and again. I never heard her say anything else."

Hurst and Darch looked at one another, plainly unable to make anything of the boy's story, although it was told reasonably enough. Before they could compose their minds to ask further questions the doctor entered the room with a satisfied air, and sat

down to roll a cigarette. Miles asked him how his patient was doing.

"I've got her to go to sleep by giving her a dose of morphia," said Toby soberly. "She's not responsible for her actions."

"After her sleep, won't she be able to speak sensibly?" asked Hurst.

"I don't think so. It's my opinion," went on the doctor, striking a match in a leisurely way, "that she has been struck a heavy blow on her head which has disordered her brain."

"Who could have done that?"

"Your brother, I suppose," Smith blew a cloud of smoke, "during the struggle when he was killed. He defended himself in some way. How did she manage to hide?" Toby looked at the three before him.

Darch hastily explained what Jum had said. "We're as far off knowing the truth as ever," said Miles disconsolately. "Jum only knows what Mrs. Frint chose to tell him."

"Only that," said Jum, bending his head; "and it was because Mr. Hurst sent away aunt, who was attending to Mam'zel, that I gave him sauce and got beaten. I have had to look after her myself during the last few days, and got tired of doing so. For that reason I brought her downstairs."

"I suppose she really did go to Miss Melicent's bedroom one night?" asked Darch curiously.

"Yes. Mrs. Frint—my aunt, sir—was in a rare fright over that. But Mam'zel got away while aunt was sleeping, though how she found Miss Melicent's bedroom aunt didn't know."

"She didn't enter by the door?" said Hurst suddenly.

"No, sir," answered Jum promptly. "Aunt showed Mam'zel several secret ways of getting from

one room to another, so that she could escape if anything came to light about her being in the house. There is a secret entrance into Miss Melicent's bedroom."

"Why didn't you say this at the time?" asked Hurst crossly.

"Aunt told me not to, sir. And when you had the house searched, aunt hid Mam'zel in another secret place—I don't know where."

"It seems to me that Mrs. Frint is the person to examine," said Darch after a pause, during which he turned over matters in his mind. "You said, Mr. Hurst, that she knew the Hall as well as you and better, which seems to be the case, since you did not know where Mam'zel was hidden when Jupp searched the house. But Mrs. Frint knows more than that; she knows if Mam'zel murdered the Squire."

"If," repeated Hurst angrily, "there's no 'if' about it, Darch. Of course she murdered the Squire."

"Or aunt did," said Jum quickly.

They stared at him. "What makes you say that?" asked Smith quickly also.

"Well, I only think she might have. Aunt had a temper, sir. She might have come upon Mam'zel and the Squire and have lost it."

"Pooh! pooh!" said Hurst indulgently; "there was no reason for Frint to murder my brother. He was her best friend. You are talking rubbish."

"Perhaps I am, sir," said the boy meekly. "But we'll know the truth when Mam'zel gets her senses back."

"If she ever does," said Toby with a shrug.

"Do you think she will, doctor?" inquired Ralph anxiously.

"It doesn't look like it at present," was the reply.

"But, in any case, failing Mam'zel, why not question Mrs. Frint?"

"I don't know where she is," said Ralph, biting his nails and looking worried. "I was too hasty in sending her away. She hasn't written to me since she went to London."

"Did she go there?" asked Darch meaningly.

"She said she was going, and would let me know where to send her boxes to as soon as she was settled. I dropped her at the Brant station and drove away, so I don't know what ticket she took."

"Well, Mrs. Frint must be found," said the barrister decidedly.

The big man nodded his assent. "I'll put an advertisement in the London papers, unless she has gone to that Camden Town address where your mother lived, Jum."

"I could go up and see, sir," said Jum brightly.

"Failing the advertisement, you may as well try. I'll write out the advertisement and send it up to several morning and evening newspapers. And now we have settled things I suggest that you two should go home."

"I stay here to look after Mam'zel Clarice," said Toby promptly. "Melicent is watching her just now, and I can't have her kept up all night. You go home, Miles."

"Well, I'm not much use here," said Miles, rising reluctantly; "but what about informing Inspector Jupp?"

"He mustn't see Mam'zel," said Toby quickly, "for the sight of his uniform would make her violent again. Better wait for a few days."

Hurst nodded, well content that this should be so. "Only the servants will talk," he said with a sigh.

"Well, then, tell Jupp, but keep him out of the

sick-room," was Smith's testy reply. "I'm not going to risk his seeing Mam'zel. She may get her senses back, or she may not. In any case, the sight of Jupp won't do her any good."

"What about Lady Gibson and Sylvia?"

"They have gone to bed, and I've given Lady Gibson a sleeping draught. We have done all we can do this evening, Miles, so you had better go home."

"And can I stay here, sir?" asked Jum, looking timidly at his master.

"Yes, my boy. We'll say no more about your bad behaviour. You have made amends; you have made amends. But you must not accuse your aunt of murder."

"It's only an idea," said Jum, hanging his head.

"Better keep the idea to yourself then. Good night, Miles. Come over to-morrow and we'll see what else transpires."

Miles went away with Smith, leaving Hurst and the boy together. At the front door, while Darch was putting on his overcoat, he asked Smith a question: "What do you think of Jum?"

"Seems all right," said Toby laconically; but Miles shook his head. He had his doubts of Jum. There was something behind the boy's extraordinary submission.

CHAPTER XX.

LADY GIBSON'S STORY.

WHEN Darch awoke next morning he lay thinking for some time over the extraordinary events of the previous night. It was astonishing that Mam'zel Clarice should have been hidden in the house all these months, while she was being sought for far and wide; it was astonishing that she should have been discovered and brought back by Jum. But to Darch's mind the most astonishing thing of all was the boy's behaviour towards Hurst. Jum had a great sense of his own dignity, and it was unlikely that he would forgive a thrashing, however well deserved. Certainly he had a sense of gratitude, so far as Ralph was concerned, and had usually hesitated about saying things against his benefactor. But Miles remembered that when the boy had come to see him last, he had distinctly left the impression that he intended to revenge his aunt's unjust dismissal. Yet here he was bowing down before the man who had dismissed her, and asking for his forgiveness.

There was no doubt in Darch's mind that Jum was playing a game of some sort, and while the young man was dressing he wondered vainly what the game might be. Had the boy brought down the woman to accuse Hurst of being implicated in

the crime? If so, he had failed in his object, owing to Mam'zel's loss of memory. But then Jum knew previously that her memory was lost, so he could not have introduced the accused woman to get Hurst into trouble. Then, again, Jum hinted that his aunt might have struck the blow, and knowing how deeply thankful Jum was to his aunt, Miles was puzzled to know why the boy should blacken her character. It was all very difficult to understand, and when breakfast was over the barrister walked to the Hall to learn all he could. His first interview, he decided, was to be with Jum.

Strangely enough, he met the boy at the gates of the park, and still more strangely, the boy ran to meet him. Darch was immediately on his guard, for he did not know what scheme the lad had in his head. For this reason he did not utter a word, while Jum hastily explained himself.

"I was coming to see you, sir," said Jum, volubly and earnestly, "for you must have thought I talked queerly in the library last night. I just want to say that you must trust me."

Darch was surprised into speech by the word. "Why?"

"Because I know much more than I said, sir, only I can't speak without any proofs."

"Proofs of what?"

"Of all these queer things that have happened since the statue closed its hand," said Jum pointedly. "I know you think that I'm blowing hot and cold, Mr. Darch, first going against Mr. Hurst and then making it up with him. Also in speaking against my aunt as I did. But I have a reason."

"What is it? I want you to trust me, Jum."

"I can't, sir." The boy drew back, looking obstinate. "If I told you what I know, and what I guess, you'd only laugh at me, for I haven't any

proof that my ideas are correct. Only trust me, sir. You have been kind to me, so has Miss Melicent, and my aunt also. I wish to serve you all three."

"Mr. Hurst has also been kind to you, Jum."

"Oh, him," the boy made a gesture of contempt. "He has his reasons for that, Mr. Darch. But tell me, will you trust me?"

"Yes," said Miles, after a steady look at the open face of the boy.

"And if you don't see me for ever so long, you'll trust me?"

"Yes," said Darch again, quite puzzled; "but I don't understand——"

"You will some day, sir, when I make a clean breast of it. Please don't ask me any questions now. But I'll tell you one thing, sir. Inspector Jupp's at the Hall."

Darch uttered an exclamation of surprise. "Who sent for him?"

"No one, sir. But the news that Mam'zel Clarice had been found got from the servants to the village, in spite of Mr. Ralph's telling them to hold their tongues. And from the village the news got to Serbery. It's only ten o'clock now, sir, but Inspector Jupp arrived a quarter of an hour ago."

Miles would have asked further questions, but that Jum ran away at the top of his speed, passing along the riverside road in the direction of Brant. Remembering that Hurst had driven Mrs. Frint to Brant, the young man wondered if she had remained there instead of going to town. Wondered also if Jum was going to bring her dramatically to the Hall, as he had brought Mam'zel Clarice. This last interview with the boy deepened the mystery of his proceedings rather than explained them, and, sorely puzzled, Miles took his way up to the Hall.

Here he found Jupp in the library, listening to

the explanation of Hurst and the statements of Toby, who had been with Mam'zel all night. The Inspector looked cross and his face was lowering, for he was annoyed to think that he had searched the Hall in vain. As a matter of fact, he seemed inclined to blame Hurst for his failure.

"You know everything that is to be known about this place," said Jupp in sharp tones, "so you must have guessed where this woman was concealed."

"I guessed nothing of the sort," said Hurst furiously. "How dare you insinuate such a thing. This old house is full of queer nooks and corners, and although both I and my brother knew many of them, Mrs. Frint knew more. For some reason, best known to herself, she aided this woman to escape after the murder, and changed her room so that she could conceal her better."

"Then I must examine Mrs. Frint," said the Inspector, more exasperated than ever. "You say you dismissed her."

"Yes; it's no use my explaining all that again. I have sent up an advertisement to half a dozen London papers in the hope that she will reappear to explain things."

"She won't reappear if she is in league with Mam'zel over the murder. I am sure of that. I wish you hadn't dismissed her."

"I wish I hadn't," retorted Ralph; "but how was I to know that she was behaving in this way? She had to be dismissed, as she was highly impertinent to me. A most forward and pushing woman."

"Well, I'll wire to Scotland Yard and put the police on to her. But what about this woman upstairs?"

"She is asleep," said Smith promptly, "and has been asleep all the night and up to the present. Don't waken her."

"Why not? I wish to arrest her."

"She's quite mad, and is not fit to be arrested."

"Mad or not, I'm going to remove her," said Jupp doggedly.

"Of course you can do what you like about that," replied the doctor coolly; "but I warn you that if she is wakened now and arrested, her reason will be gone once and for all."

"And if she is left alone?"

"She may awaken with her senses more or less restored," said Toby calmly positive. "Of course, it is difficult for me to diagnose the case. But I think that a long sleep will put her comparatively right. She is suffering from a blow on the back of the head."

"The Squire gave her that, I suppose," said Darch, who was listening intently. "At least, I presume he defended himself in some way."

"We'll never learn the truth until the woman speaks," said Hurst impatiently, "and I agree with the doctor that she should be allowed to sleep, so that there may be a chance of her recovering her senses. Still, it is for Jupp to say what is to be done."

"Are you sure it is dangerous for her to be moved?" the Inspector turned towards the young doctor.

"I would stake my professional reputation that it is. You can have another opinion if you like."

"No," said Jupp, rising with a satisfied look. "I'll take your word, doctor, since you seem to be so positive. But I'll leave some of my men here to see that she doesn't escape. Mrs. Frint," added the Inspector, with a grim smile, "might return."

"I wish she would return, with all my heart," said Hurst heavily. "I want to get at the truth of this business."

"So do I," Jupp assured him. "Well, I'll leave my men in charge and go back to Serbery to communicate with the London police. Where's that boy who got hold of the woman?"

"Somewhere about; I don't know," said Hurst, carelessly.

"Then he must be got hold of in his turn. I believe, from what you gentlemen say, that he knows more than he admits."

After his late interview with Jum, Miles was quite sure that the boy did, and, moreover, he could have told Jupp in which direction the boy had gone. But this he did not do, as he wished Jum to be unhampered in his plans—whatever these might be—by the interference of the police. So Jupp went away to find the boy and travel to Serbery. He failed to come across the lad, so was obliged to attend to his other business first before seeking particularly. There was no time to be lost in notifying the London police that Mrs. Frint was wanted.

Meanwhile, Smith informed Miles that Lady Gibson wished to see him. "She is worried about something," said Toby, "and wishes to consult you. Come up to her room."

"I forbid you to go," said Ralph, starting up with an angry look. "If Lady Gibson wishes to consult any one, she can consult me, since I am to be her son-in-law."

While Ralph was speaking, Sylvia entered the room, looking more beautiful than ever in a plain morning dress of white linen. She had overheard the speech of Hurst, and it was she who answered it.

"You can come up also," she said with cold composure. "My mother intends to ask Miles's advice."

"I forbid her to do so."

"My mother is past your forbidding her to do anything, Mr. Hurst. You have driven her into a corner, and now she will fight. She is up and dressed in the sitting-room adjoining her bedroom, and will see you both."

"I'll stop her mouth," muttered Hurst furiously, and rushed out of the room, immediately followed by Darch, who did not intend to lose the opportunity of learning Lady Gibson's secret.

"Is your mother going to throw Hurst over?" asked Toby bluntly.

"She would if she could, but she is not able," said Sylvia sadly. "No, don't ask me to explain, but wait until Miles returns to tell you everything. In the meantime, let us go to Mam'zel's room. I want to relieve Melicent, who has been watching her since seven. She must be tired."

"Can you trust your mother alone with Hurst?" asked Toby doubtfully. "She is hysterical, you know, and——"

"She won't be hysterical when Miles is there to support her," interrupted Sylvia. "Toby," she spoke vehemently, "I do hope that something will happen to prevent my marriage with Mr. Hurst."

"And forward your marriage with me?" said Toby impetuously.

"Yes," Sylvia cried; "you know how I love you and hate him."

"If you would explain——"

"I can't; I can't. Wait until you see Miles again," and to prevent further questioning, Sylvia fled out of the library and up the stairs to relieve the vigil of Melicent. Toby, looking sorely puzzled, followed slowly. He was quite unable to understand what she meant.

Meanwhile, Darch and Hurst were in the sitting-room adjoining Lady Gibson's bedroom and, sitting

in a deep arm-chair, its occupant was grimly, with a rigid, white face, defying Hurst. Lady Gibson had dispensed with rouge ; her hair was twisted in a simple knot at the back of her head, and she wore a plain grey dressing-gown, without adornments of any kind. Seen thus she looked an old, worn-out woman, but in spite of her age and terror she was determined to make a confidant of Darch, whom she had always respected and liked.

"It's no use your going on at me, Ralph," she said firmly. "I can't stand your tyranny any longer. I'm going to speak out."

"Your speaking out won't prevent my marriage with Sylvia," he sneered, in a sullen manner, and furious to think that she was rebelling against him.

"I hope it will, Ralph. When Miles knows all, he may find a way out of the wicked business. I would rather that Sylvia married Dr. Smith, poor as he is, than a devil such as you are."

"Hear her!" cried Hurst, turning towards Miles and sneering derisively. "She has known me all my life, yet she speaks of me in that way."

"It is because I have known you all my life that I do call you by the only name you deserve," said the woman bitterly. "You forget that I knew you when we were both young and was well aware of your profligate ways."

"I reformed," said Ralph sulkily, and sat down, making no further attempt to prevent her from speaking the truth.

"Yes ; because you had no money, and Edgar would only keep you here on condition that you did reform. He dismissed John Frint and made you his bailiff."

"And a very good bailiff I was."

"Because you had to be. I remember you talked

about the serpent being kept straight while in the bamboo. No one but Edgar and I knew how truly you spoke. You were always a bad man."

"Well, well, get on with your confession," said Hurst impatiently. "No one here can say a word about my character, so no one will bother about what you will say. I don't care."

"I think you will before I have done," said Lady Gibson swiftly. "As to my confession, as you call it, that will take but a few minutes. Miles," she made a great effort to screw up her courage, "before I married Sir Guy Gibson I had a husband."

"Who was an anarchist," supplemented Ralph sneeringly.

"Yes, Louis Durand was an anarchist," said Lady Gibson quietly, while Darch looked amazed at the information she had given. "When I was a young girl in Paris, I met him in good society. He was handsome and romantic, so I ran away with him. I learned, when too late, that he manufactured bombs, and was implicated in plots against the Government. He was a gentleman, certainly, but a fanatic, and as bad a man as Ralph there."

"Well," said Miles, while Hurst chuckled and sneered, "why should you be afraid of this being known?"

"For Sylvia's sake," said Lady Gibson in a whisper, and Hurst chuckled again in a most hateful manner. "Louis, while making a bomb, was blown up, at least I was told so. I therefore returned to my people, who forgave me for marrying him and induced me to become the wife of Sir Guy."

"Well," said Darch again, and wondering, "this also is no great secret to make you sacrifice Sylvia to this scoundrel."

"Gently, Miles, gently," said Hurst, looking up venomously.

"A man is a scoundrel who behaves to a woman as you have done, Hurst. And I'll thank you not to call me 'Miles.'"

"Don't quarrel, but let me tell you everything," implored Lady Gibson hysterically, "for I feel that I can't stand much more trouble. After I married Sir Guy, and Sylvia was born, my first husband reappeared."

"Oh!" Darch was taken aback, and Hurst laughed loudly.

"He had not been killed," explained the poor woman hurriedly, "but only injured, and when he got better he came to find me. I was married, so he told my husband everything. But heaven was my friend," she added, sobbing, "for soon after Louis put in an appearance, he was run over by a lorry and killed. Guy behaved to me like the good, kind man he was, and we were quietly married again."

"But the marriage didn't make Sylvia legitimate," scoffed Hurst, who was enjoying the shame of the poor woman.

"Hold your tongue," said Darch, turning on him roughly, "or I'll twist your neck, you scoundrel."

"It would take a better man than you to do that," taunted Hurst; "but I can afford to hold my tongue, as Sylvia can only refuse to marry me at the cost of the truth being told."

"You swine!" Miles almost struck him, and would have done so had not Lady Gibson caught his arm.

"Wait! wait!" she implored. "I can punish him in another way."

"Punish me—punish me!" shouted Ralph contemptuously.

"Yes," she said straightly. "Miles, this brute learned the truth from an anarchist called Struma,

He's an old man now, but he was young when I married Louis. Ralph knew something of my secret, and sought out this man, who is in London. From him he learned the truth, and after Edgar's death he said he would publish the fact that Sylvia was illegitimate if I didn't allow her to marry him. I told Sylvia, and she consented, both for my sake and for her own. Now you know the worst," and she broke down, sobbing.

"And how are you going to remedy the worst?" asked Ralph, with a shrug of his huge shoulders. He felt quite capable of holding his own.

It was Lady Gibson who answered, not Darch. Just as he opened his mouth to reply she sprang to her feet with clenched hands and a furious face.

"By exposing you, Ralph! By exposing you!"

"Dear me," he sneered; "and in what way?"

"You got a bomb from Struma. He makes them, and very dangerous and deadly bombs they are. I went to see him, after you threatened me, to ask why he had betrayed me to you. He never intended to do so, and wept when I told him what you had done. If he was a younger man and in better health Struma would have killed you for making use of the information he gave you as you have done. Struma would not have given you the bomb but that you paid him a large sum of money which, in his poverty, he could not refuse."

"Such rubbish!" said Ralph, who was beginning to look uneasy. "Why should I buy a bomb?"

"Why should you plot your niece's death?" retorted Lady Gibson.

"It's a lie!" Hurst turned pale and advanced threateningly.

Darch, with a single leap, placed himself between the two. "Stop where you are, Hurst, or I'll——"

"Fight me," raged Ralph furiously; "come on then."

"No; I'll call up one of the policemen and give you in charge."

"For what?" Hurst recoiled, and his face quivered in spite of all his efforts to maintain his composure.

"On the charge of plotting against Melicent," said Darch coolly. "I suspected as much before. Lady Gibson confirms my suspicions."

"She can't prove them," said Ralph sullenly.

"I can't, as you say," she said, sitting down again and passing her tongue over her dry lips; "but I am sure you wish to get Melicent out of the way in order to get the money. You told me that you would have plenty of money soon, when you married Sylvia."

"But I didn't say that I'd get it by killing Melicent."

"No; you are too clever to give yourself away," said Lady Gibson passionately; "but when I heard of those so-called accidents I suspected the worst. You planned to get her to fall down the stairs; you planned to get her killed by the falling elm-bough—I am sure of it."

"Prove what you say," sneered Ralph, recovering his bravado.

"I can't; but I'm sure you intended her death. And the bomb—why did you buy the bomb, unless it was to use it when all else failed?"

"I didn't buy any bomb, you silly woman," said Ralph, now quite composed, "and as you have told your secret, perhaps Darch here will see that he can't prevent me from marrying Sylvia."

"We'll see about that," said Miles coolly; "you are not so safe as you think you are, Hurst. When

Mam'zel Clarice recovers her reason she may make statements which won't be to your credit."

"Frint, also, I suppose, when she is found," said Hurst, equally coolly.

"Yes ; things are dark now, but when the light comes——"

"Ah ! when the light comes," Ralph swaggered towards the door ; "but the light will never come. I'm too smart for any of you to catch me. You can come down, Mr. Darch, and tell everything that Lady Gibson has told you. It won't make the least difference to me," and with a loud, coarse laugh he went out of the room, banging the door with a crash.

Miles, wishing he could thrash the ruffian, turned to Lady Gibson, only to find that she had fainted. In a moment he was out of the room also, calling on Sylvia. When he got to the hall, Melicent appeared with Jum, to whom she had been talking in the library.

"Sylvia's watching Mam'zel," she said hurriedly. "What is it ? oh, what is it ?"

"Only that Lady Gibson has fainted," said Miles soothingly. "Go up and look after her. When she comes to herself, tell her that it is all right, and that I'll come and see her again this evening. Jum, come with me."

Melicent, not staying to question him, ran up the stairs, and Darch, along with the boy, walked towards the front door. There they were stopped by a policeman.

"You can go, sir," he said, with great civility ; "but the boy must stay."

"Why ?" asked Miles angrily, for his nerves were none of the best.

"Inspector's orders, sir. He wants the boy kept here until his return."

"Very good." Miles turned to the boy. "I'll

see you when I come this evening, Jum. Remember, I trust you."

"Yes, sir," said Jum brightly; "you'll find I am to be trusted."

Relieved in his mind by the boy's significant tone, Darch walked home to his own place. He wanted to be alone to think matters over, for what with one thing and another, his brain was in a perfect whirl. That Ralph was a blackguard, who would stop at nothing to obtain his ends, was very plain after Lady Gibson's confession. But Darch did not see how to circumvent him in any way. He held the whip hand so far as Sylvia and her mother were concerned, and nothing could be done in that direction without the poor girl suffering. And with regard to the accidents, he was equally at a loss. There was positively no proof that Ralph had any hand in them, and although Miles was as sure as Lady Gibson that they had been arranged, yet it was impossible to bring home the truth to Hurst. The whole position was one of singular difficulty.

Darch wished that Toby would return so that he could consult him, but the doctor was so anxious to look after his patient that he remained at the Hall during the afternoon. Finally Miles, realising that thinking over matters led to nothing, determined, after tea, to return to the Hall and talk things over with Melicent. It was growing dark when he arrived, and he was surprised to find the place in commotion. Wondering what new trouble had occurred to cause this sensation, Darch walked into the house, after some expostulation with the policeman, who was disinclined to let him pass.

"Inspector Jupp's here, sir, and he says that no one is to go out or come in, sir," said the officer, looking very important. "That woman's recovered her senses, and he's with her."

"Mam'zel has recovered her——"

Just as Miles got thus far in his speech Melicent appeared with red eyes and disordered hair.

"I heard your voice, Miles," she sobbed, flying into his arms. "There's such trouble. Mam'zel has recovered, and is speaking quite reasonably. She's saying the most awful things about Uncle Ralph."

"And your uncle?" Darch drew a long breath, greatly excited.

"He has disappeared, and Jum has disappeared also."

CHAPTER XXI.

PART OF THE TRUTH.

DARCH found it impossible to soothe Melicent. As the policeman on guard refused to let him go further than the hall, he sent up a message by one of the servants, who was summoned, asking the Inspector if he could enter. Then he drew the sobbing girl to a bench, as far away from the constable as possible, and tried to calm her. Heedless of the publicity, Melicent clung to her lover and refused to be consoled. She was wholly unstrung.

"I'm sure I never liked Uncle Ralph after he tried to force Sylvia into a marriage," she wept, "although I don't know how he did it. But he can't be as bad as that horrid woman says."

"What does she say?"

"Oh, I can't tell you. I only heard a little, and then rushed out of the room, scared to death. But it's a shame saying things against Uncle Ralph when he isn't here to defend himself."

"Where is he?" asked Miles sharply.

"Oh, don't speak like that!" cried Melicent, all nerves and tears. "You make me jump. I can't bear it. I don't know where he is. He went away, and so did Jum, although Inspector Jupp wanted to see them both."

Seeing that it was impossible to get a coherent explanation from the crying girl, Darch beckoned to the policeman. "What's this about Mr. Hurst and the boy?" he asked imperatively.

"They've gone, sir."

"Where?"

"There's more than you wants to know that, sir," said the officer grimly. "A lot of our men are hunting for them. The Inspector wired for them to Serbery as soon as Mr. Hurst and the boy made themselves scarce."

"Why did they do that?"

The policeman removed his helmet and scratched his head. "Well, sir, I can't tell you that. All I know is that when Mr. Hurst learned that the woman upstairs was sensible and able to talk, he ran away. Whether he took the boy, or whether the boy followed him, I can't say."

"But why did you let them go?"

"We didn't know they intended to cut, sir. And the queer thing is that none of us know how they got away. They didn't get out of any of the doors here, though, to be sure, they may have slipped out of some window. Anyhow, they have disappeared for the last three hours and can't be found."

"Where were they last seen?"

"In the place they call the Sanctuary, sir, and I'm sure there ain't any way out of that!"

Miles started when the Sanctuary was mentioned, remembering the legend of Amyas Hurst and the way in which people had disappeared in his day. It seemed as though history was repeating itself. He wondered if there was any secret way in and out of the place, and if the same had to do with the statue. It seemed very probable. Darch was very troubled, and did not know what to do. The policeman retired to his post near the door again, and Melicent still

sobbed bitterly. Miles endeavoured to get her to explain what was being said about her uncle, but she refused to enlighten him.

"It's too horrid, and I can't believe it," was all she replied.

In answer to the message, Jupp himself appeared, coming down the stairs, and he looked grave and disturbed. In his hand he held several loose sheets of paper, on which Miles guessed was written the confession of Mam'zel Clarice. He rose and went toward the Inspector, anxious to learn how the woman had murdered the Squire, and why she had done so, and how she had escaped.

"Can I be of any service?" he asked Jupp as an excuse for his coming.

"Yes; I want you to come into the library and hear what this woman has said," answered Jupp promptly. "It's all set down here, signed by her, and witnessed by myself and Dr. Smith. He is with her still, as the excitement of telling her story has made her bad again. Come into the library, Mr. Darch, and you can come also, if you like, Miss Hurst."

"No!" Melicent sprang to her feet looking terrified and tearful. "I can't bear it. I'm sure Uncle Ralph is not so bad as that horrid woman makes him out to be. I only heard a little, but that little was quite enough."

"But, Melicent," expostulated Miles, distressed by her grief, "it is just as well to know the worst. Be brave and face the worst."

"I've heard the worst, Miles, and it's so dreadful that I don't believe it at all." Melicent dried her eyes and turned away towards the stairs, while the Inspector looked at her pityingly. "I'll go to Sylvia, and you can tell me everything later."

"Better let her go," said Jupp in an undertone.

"I wish to have a quiet chat with you, Mr. Darch, and her tears will only upset things. I don't wonder she is crying, poor thing," ended the Inspector regretfully. "It's a dreadful story, but whether it's true or false I can't say."

Melicent mounted the stairs slowly, and did not turn her head, even though Darch called out to her to be calm. When she disappeared, he went with the Inspector to the library and closed the door. Man as he was, and accustomed to face trouble, Miles felt little better than Melicent did. Things were so strange and uncomfortable as it was, that he dreaded to hear what the Inspector was about to tell him. It seemed as if they could not be worse; yet if Melicent was to be believed the worst was yet to come. However, for the girl's sake, they had to be faced, so Darch sat down and braced himself to hear the confession of Mam'zel Clarice.

"I can't say if it's true or false," said Jupp again, as he spread the sheets on the table and flattened them out. "I shan't read you this, Mr. Darch, but will tell you the whole story in my own way. For the last two hours I have been asking, questioning the woman and setting down her answers. What she did explain is terrible, and I don't wonder the poor girl ran away."

"Well, tell me the truth, and let me stand between Miss Hurst and this dreadful truth, whatever it is," said Miles, with a twisted smile. "I am engaged to her, you know, Mr. Inspector."

"Yes, I know, and I'm very glad that you have the right to protect her. She has had much sorrow as it is, poor thing, and she will have more."

"When?" Darch started, so serious was the officer's tone.

"When we catch her uncle," replied Jupp grimly.

"Tell me, in a word, what you mean. I can't stand this suspense."

"In a word I mean 'murder,' and that explains everything."

"Do you mean that Hurst has been murdered?"

"No; Hurst has disappeared because he is wanted for murder, if what Mam'zel Clarice says here is true," and Jupp laid his hand on the sheets.

"Oh!" Darch looked at the officer with a horrified expression. "Do you mean to say that Hurst is an accomplice of the woman and approved of the murder of his brother?"

"Oh, no!" answered Jupp smoothly; "I mean that Hurst murdered his brother himself."

"Never!" Darch stared at the speaker incredulously.

"It's true—that is, if Mam'zel Clarice is to be believed. I said that before and I say it again. She tells a very plausible story, as you will hear, and I should like to have your opinion on it."

"What is Miss Hurst's opinion?"

"She didn't hear it all. She listened until the woman accused her uncle of striking the blow, and then ran out of the room, shrieking that it was false."

"And Smith, what does he say?"

"He believes that Mam'zel Clarice is speaking the truth. The question is, what will you say, Mr. Darch?"

"Let me hear the story," said the other, and composed himself to listen.

Jupp lost no time. He leaned back in his chair, crossed his legs and placed his fingers and thumbs together, disregarding the written confession, and telling the tale in his own way. "I must begin at the beginning," he said, in a deliberate way. "Miss Brown, usually called Mam'zel Clarice, is the daughter of Septimus Brown, the late Squire's tutor.

Soon after her father's death she went to live in Paris with her French mother, and remained there for many years, receiving, it seems, help from the Squire, who liked her as a child. When her mother died some time ago, Mam'zel came over to England to ask for assistance. She received it, for the Squire procured her an appointment in the Serbery school as the French governess."

"I know all this," said Darch, somewhat impatiently. "Go on."

"There's no hurry," said Jupp, still deliberate in his utterance and without changing his position. "I wish you to understand everything clearly, and so must explain fully. Miss Brown came over, not so much to get assistance from the Squire, as to marry him if she could. It seems that, misled by his affection for her as a child, she believed that he really intended to marry her when she grew up. Her mother, it seems, fostered this idea, being a very foolish woman. When Mam'zel Clarice came here, Hurst fostered it also."

"But why?" Darch looked amazed.

"For his own ends, as you will hear. As you know, Mam'zel, after waiting for a long time for the Squire to propose, came to the Hall when she heard that he was engaged to Miss Gibson. You know what took place."

Miles nodded. "I was present. Mam'zel tried to stab the Squire with a knife snatched from the wall, and Hurst picked her up in his arms to carry her out of the house."

"Precisely; and the action of snatching the knife from the wall gave to Hurst the idea of being able to kill his brother and lay the blame on the woman. If you remember, Mr. Darch, the Squire was stabbed with the same Afghan knife, taken from the same trophy of arms over the fireplace."

"Yes! yes!" Miles leaned his elbows on the table and listened with all his ears. "Go on, go on. But why did Hurst wish to kill his brother?" he asked as an afterthought.

"He did not wish the Squire to marry Miss Gibson. At least, that is the reason Mam'zel Clarice assigns for the crime. But to continue: Afterwards, Mr. Hurst went to Mam'zel Clarice secretly by night and said that he wanted her to marry his brother."

"But the Squire didn't," broke in Darch impatiently. "That's absurd."

"Wait, wait! You will hear all in due time. Can't you see that the man was deceiving the woman for his own ends. His pretended desire that she should marry the Squire was part of the plot."

"I can't see it."

"You will if you will listen and not interrupt," snapped Jupp, rather irritably. "Hurst, according to Mam'zel, said that his brother refused to see her again, but that if she did manage to see him, he would probably yield to her solicitations. He therefore promised to get her into the house, secretly, and arranged that she should get the key of the postern."

"She did, and then it was taken from her again."

"Oh, no, it wasn't!" said Jupp triumphantly. "Hurst told her that he had given the key to his niece, who was going to visit you and the doctor, along with Miss Gibson. So, as was arranged between the two, Mam'zel watched for the return of the lot of you. When she saw the key put into the door—and she could see it since an electric torch was used to show where the keyhole was, she dropped from the tree in which she was hidden and snatched the key."

"I know that. And then Jum ran after her and made her give it up."

"Oh, no; she gave up a key—the wrong key, and kept the real one."

"Oh!" said Darch again, wondering at the cleverness of the scheme.

"Yes, it is clever," said Jupp, reading his thoughts. "Hurst is very clever, but, as it seems, not quite clever enough. However, you can see that with the key Mam'zel was able to enter the house unknown to any one. Then, to make things doubly sure and provide an alibi, Hurst sent Lady Gibson to the woman with a bribe of one hundred pounds—furnished by the Squire—to induce her to return to Paris. You know that Mam'zel agreed to do so; that she sent her boxes to London and took her departure to Brant on the motor-cycle given to her by the Squire."

"Yes; Jum saw her go towards Brant."

Jupp nodded. "The boy was set to watch her by Hurst for that purpose—to allay suspicion, I mean. Then Hurst went to London for the night, having arranged what Mam'zel was to do."

"What was she to do?"

"Pretend to go to Brant and pull the wool over Jum's eyes; then return and place her motor-cycle at the edge of the wood, outside the Sanctuary."

"I remember that Walters and I found traces of it there, owing to oil having been spilt."

"I believe that oil was spilt on purpose to implicate the woman in the crime," said the Inspector dryly, "and by Hurst himself."

"I see. He returned?"

"Exactly! he went up publicly by the Serbery line and came down secretly by the Brant line. Then he walked from Brant, found the motor-cycle

on the verge of the wood, and knew thereby that Mam'zel Clarice was in the house."

"She climbed over the Sanctuary wall?" said Miles quickly.

"Oh, no, she didn't," was Jupp's unexpected reply. "She entered the house by the postern gate, having slipped into the park up the avenue. Then she stole to the study, locked the door and faced the Squire, who was reading. By this time Hurst had climbed the wall of the Sanctuary and was in the room. He entered from the outside at the same moment as she entered from the inside, and the Squire, as you might put it, was between two fires."

"And what did he say?"

"According to Mam'zel he didn't have time to say anything. Just as he began to rage at her intrusion, Hurst snatched the knife from the wall and stabbed his brother. The Squire fell dead on the floor and then Hurst lifted a heavy chair and flung himself on the woman. Before she could realise his object he struck her down, and she remembered no more."

Jupp stopped and looked pleasantly at his listener. Miles made an impatient gesture with his hand. "Go on. Why do you stop?"

"Because there is nothing more to say."

"But how did Mam'zel escape, seeing that she was insensible?"

"Ah, that's what I want to know, and what she can't tell! Everything became dim from the time she was struck down. The first thing she remembered afterwards was Mrs. Frint looking after her in her own room—that is, in Mrs. Frint's room. Then she remembers dimly having gone to warn Miss Hurst, and finally, has a recollection, more or less faint, of having been brought down to the drawing-room to face a lot of people."

"I was there," said Darch briefly; "then she remembers nothing clearly?"

"No; from the time she fell in the study to the time she awakened from the long sleep to-day is more or less of a blank filled with fragmentary suggestions, sometimes true and sometimes false. So you see we can't get at the exact truth until we catch Hurst. He has disappeared, and did so when he heard that Mam'zel had regained her senses."

"That seems to show the truth of the story you have told me."

"Yes, I'm glad to hear you say that, since I have been wavering. I can't see what motive Hurst had to kill his brother, and of course the woman would lay the blame on him if she could."

Darch reflected for a few minutes. "I believe that Hurst wanted the money, and so invented this plot to get rid of his brother without suspicion falling on himself. Mam'zel gave him the idea with her mad attack on the Squire, and he carried out the idea in the way you have described."

"That won't do," said Jupp, shaking his head, "for even if the Squire was murdered, Hurst couldn't get the money, seeing that his niece is the heiress to the property."

"Oh, he meant to get rid of her also, and tried to do so," said Miles dryly, explaining forthwith to the astonished officer how the two accidents had occurred.

"Ha!" Jupp drew a deep breath; "this seems to make things much clearer. What a devil! Well, we must find him and force him to confess. The queer thing is, Mr. Darch," added Jupp, looking puzzled, "to know how he escaped. I told my men to let no one in or out of the house, and they were at every door and about the grounds. Yet Hurst got away and took the boy with him."

"I know," Miles nodded, "and they were in the Sanctuary when they were seen last."

"What's that got to do with it?"

"Well, if you know the family legend, and I think you told me you did, it is there related that many people disappeared in the time of Amyas Hurst. It seems to me that there is some secret connected with the Sanctuary which Hurst discovered."

"There seems to be plenty of secrets connected with this house," said the Inspector petulantly, for he was still sore about his failure to discover Mam'zel when she was concealed by Mrs. Frint. "I think the best thing to do would be to burn the place down and end all the mystery."

"Or destroy the statue," said Darch, half to himself.

"Oh, you think that the image has something to do with the matter?"

"Yes; all the trouble began with the closing of the hand, and although the hand is open again the trouble still continues. So far, at least, the legend speaks falsely."

"What do you mean exactly?"

"Well, the legend says that when the hand is closed it means bad luck to the family, and we know that such was the case. But even when the hand opened the bad luck continued, so that gives the lie to the superstition."

"So the hand is open again?"

"Yes; it opened some days ago, to end misfortune, as it was said. But now the very worst misfortune of all has come."

"Do you think that Hurst has anything to do with the opening and closing of this hand?" asked Jupp, after a long pause.

"From what we have learned about him, I think he has. He was always studying family papers and

documents, so he might have stumbled across some secret in connection with the Sanctuary."

"And has made use of his knowledge?"

"That is my idea," said Darch, nodding positively.

"It's not a bad one. We'll have a look at the Black Image and find out, if possible, how that hand closes and uncloses. I wonder if Miss Hurst would let us pull the thing down?"

"Well, she has some superstition connected with it, as meaning luck, good or bad, for the family, so wishes to preserve it. All the same, if needs be, she might agree to its being pulled down. But let us try to find Hurst first."

"And Mrs. Frint also," said Jupp rising. "I believe that old woman knows a lot. Do you know that she is Hurst's wife?"

"What!" Darch started to his feet with an amazed look.

"Yes; I got that much out of the boy before he disappeared. Mrs. Frint told him that Hurst was her husband, and so induced him to hold his tongue about many things which should have been made public."

"What things?"

"Ah, I want to find out! But the boy has disappeared, willingly or unwillingly, with Hurst. I wonder if he's in the plot in Hurst's favour."

"H'm," said Darch meditatively, "I don't think so. I trust Jum, as he warned me that he might disappear."

CHAPTER XXII.

THE SECRET OF HECATE.

FOR the next three days there were busy times at the Hall. It was quite in a state of siege, since news of the sensational events which were taking place under its roof had spread rapidly. The murder of the Squire ; the legend of the Black Image ; the capture of the suspected woman ; the disappearance of Hurst and the boy ; all these things were on every one's tongue. A horde of reporters came from the surrounding district and from London, anxious to secure exciting narratives for their respective newspapers. Photographers, amateur and professional, came also to haunt the place, and morbid sightseers were very much in evidence. But all who flocked to Grenacer had to content themselves with a view of the park wall and the trees beyond it. Jupp would not allow anyone to enter the gates, which were guarded day and night. Policemen were at the entrance to the park ; in the park itself, and in the wood surrounding the Sanctuary, while quite a dozen plain-clothes detectives were indoors, poking and prying and watching and asking all kinds of questions.

The Hall servants were in a frenzy, as the presence of the police, the constant examinations, and the

sense of mystery engendered by the extraordinary disappearance of Hurst and the page, wore out their patience and endurance. They would gladly have left in a body and without their wages, but that the Inspector insisted that they should remain where they were, directly under his official eye. Mam'zel Clarice was still in Mrs. Frint's garret, attended by the doctor, for after her confession was signed and witnessed, she relapsed into a sound sleep from which there was no awakening her. Toby allowed her to sleep on, as he believed that only by complete rest could she be restored to perfect sanity. Even before she had slept again, her lucid interval had come to an end, and she had babbled deliriously, until a profound slumber silenced her tongue. And always her cry was about "danger," "the scroll," "why did Hurst read it?" and then again, "danger, danger, danger." No one could make any sense out of these ravings, although, knowing her confession, both Darch and the Inspector tried to guess what they meant. But as they could arrive at no conclusion, all they could do was to wait until she woke again, when it was possible—according to Toby—that her disordered brain might be more composed and sensible.

Lady Gibson remained at the Hall also, since the Inspector would not allow her to leave. She remained mostly in her room or in the sitting-room adjoining, attended to by Sylvia, to whom she clung like a child. She knew well enough that Darch would be silent concerning her secret, but dreaded lest Ralph, in his vindictiveness, might tell it broadcast. But Miles reassured her on this point by explaining that Hurst had quite enough to do in looking after his safety rather than in talking about a matter which could not affect it in any way. Sometimes Lady Gibson took this view; and at other

times she felt sure that Hurst was betraying her. But for Sylvia's tender nursing the poor woman would have gone off her head. As it was, she became so weak that only her daughter's constant care, and Toby's medical skill, kept her alive. And by this time she had quite overcome her hatred of the doctor, and was as anxious that he should marry Sylvia as formerly she had been opposed to his doing so.

Meanwhile, search was being made everywhere for Hurst, for Jum, and for Mrs. Frint. Not a sign could be discovered of the woman, although advertisements were in all the London papers, and a description of her appearance was given. The police hunted for her everywhere, but she could not be found and, so far as could be discovered, she had taken no ticket to London at the Brant railway station. She had disappeared as completely as the other two, and where they were was quite a mystery. No one had seen Hurst or the boy leave the house ; no one had seen them pass through the village ; no one had set eyes on them either at Serbery or Brant. They had vanished as completely as Mrs. Frint had done, and the earth might have opened to swallow all three for all the trace of their whereabouts that could be found. It was most extraordinary, and people found ample food for gossip in wondering what had become of the trio. But no one could even guess where they had gone.

Thinking over the family legend, and the fact that Hurst and the boy had been in the Sanctuary when they were last seen, Inspector Jupp searched the place and examined the statue. He believed, as Darch did, that there was a secret way out of the Sanctuary, made use of by Amyas Hurst to get rid of his victims, and utilised by his descendant to escape the law. But although every inch of the ground was examined,

although the image was looked at from every point of view, no sign of any outlet could be discovered. Certainly, as Darch pointed out, the man and boy could have escaped by scaling the wall ; but in that case they would have been seen abroad. It was impossible that they could escape the watchfulness of the police, who had their nets spread over all the country. Every railway station, every seaport, was watched, but without success. All that Jupp could think was that the fugitives were hiding somewhere in the neighbourhood, Mrs. Frint included. For if the housekeeper, as had been proved, took no ticket for London, it was possible that she had not gone there. Jupp became quite weary in endeavouring to solve the mystery, but the more he tried to do so, the more he failed.

Melicent now knew the whole story of her uncle's guilt, and after the first feelings of shame and horror that he could behave so basely, were over, she braced herself to calmness. As she had faced things before, bravely, so she faced them now, and was even willing that the statue should be pulled down, so that the truth should become known. But she regretted having to do so, and one evening when in the Sanctuary with Miles, looking at the sinister figure, said as much. Darch shrugged his shoulder.

"I don't see why you should mind, Melicent," he said, staring at the gigantic image standing grimly and blackly on its mossy platform. "It's not a pretty object and, moreover, so far, has brought nothing but trouble."

"Then you do believe that the opening and shutting of the hand has brought trouble?" she asked triumphantly.

"I believe that the opening and closing of the hand is due to some secret mechanism," said Miles after a pause, "and that your uncle found some old

document which explained the same. Some parchment or scroll or——”

“Miles,” Melicent spoke in an excited tone, “don’t you remember how Mam’zel keeps talking about a scroll, which uncle shouldn’t have read.”

“Yes; that makes me believe that he found a scroll describing how the hand could be opened and shut,” said Miles quietly; “but why are you so excited?”

“Because there *is* the scroll,” and Melicent pointed to the leaden roll which Hecate held in her left hand.

“Oh, that’s only a fancy touch to indicate the scroll of fate.”

“It’s lead, and lead can be rolled and unrolled,” said the girl positively, as she fingered the scroll. “Try and pull it away from the hand, Miles, and see if there is any writing on it.”

The idea was so wild that the young man laughed it to scorn. However, to pacify the girl, who was greatly excited, he tugged at the roll in the hand of the image. Once, twice and thrice he tugged. Then, to his surprise, he did pull the scroll away from the closed hand. “Hullo,” said Miles, greatly surprised, “it isn’t fastened to the hand. Evidently it was meant to be removed.”

“Of course, of course,” cried Melicent feverishly. “Open it, open it. I do believe that it contains some explanation about the statue and our family luck. Oh, do be quick, Miles.”

“My dear child, it isn’t easy to unroll,” said the young man, who was deftly bending the lead. “It’s squeezed together pretty tightly.”

However, after much difficulty, he managed to flatten out the lead and went indoors to examine it by lamp-light. Laying it on the table in the study he examined it carefully, while Melicent peered over

his shoulder, breathing quickly and with shining eyes.

"It has writing on it," she cried, dancing with excitement. "Lots of writing. But what queer-looking letters."

"Gothic letters; the kind of black type one finds in old tomes," explained the lawyer, becoming excited in his turn, "and it's in Latin too. By jove, Melicent, I believe you've hit upon the truth. This is the scroll that your uncle read, and I believe it contains an account of how to open and shut the hand of Hecate. There's some kind of machinery about the business, you may be sure. But why did your uncle put it back again, and so risk the discovery of his villainy?"

"He never thought that any one would think it was meant to be taken out of Hecate's hand," said Melicent reflectively; "and but that Mam'zel talked of the scroll, I shouldn't have suggested your removing it. Do read it, Miles."

"My dear child, I can't, straight away. It's in Latin, and some of the Gothic letters are very faint. I'll tackle it to-night, and probably will have deciphered the whole thing by the morning."

"I shan't sleep a wink until I know what is in it."

"Don't be silly, Melicent. And don't say a word about this to any one. I'll translate it and see what it says, then we can tell Jupp."

"All right," said Melicent soberly. "I'll not say a word. But I'm sure I shan't sleep a wink."

"Nor shall I," answered Darch ruefully. "This will take me the whole night to get the hang of. It is a find. I believe it will solve the whole mystery of the Sanctuary."

Miles did sit up the whole night, for, good scholar as he was, and patient in every way, the scroll taxed all his capabilities to decipher

and translate. For hours and hours he laboured, setting down letter after letter and word after word on a sheet of paper until he had the whole transcribed. Towards the end of the scroll some of the Gothic letters had been rubbed out, and the information contained in the document—if it could be called so—came to an abrupt end. Then Miles translated the Latin into English, and was amazed by what he read. He would have awakened the house with a war-whoop, but that he managed to keep himself well in hand. It was dawn when he ended his labours, and he retired to bed to snatch a couple of hours' sleep, and did his best to do so. But his every effort was vain, for the reading of the scroll had excited him too much. He was up and dressed and sent a policeman on a bicycle for Jupp long before Melicent made her appearance, and then he refused to answer her eager inquiries until the Inspector arrived.

"Why can't you tell me about it?" asked Melicent, much vexed by this reticence.

"You'll learn everything when Jupp arrives," replied Darch hastily. "Meanwhile, tell one of the policemen to fetch the village blacksmith."

"What for?" Melicent obediently turned to go.

"You'll learn when you and I and Jupp are in the Sanctuary learning the secret which Hecate has held for so long. Since the days of James, I may say, for it was then Amyas Hurst put up the beastly statue."

"Hecate's secret was found out by Uncle Ralph," said Melicent dryly, "so she has not kept it to herself so long as you think."

However, she sent the constable for the blacksmith and his tools, wondering greatly why they were wanted. When Jupp arrived, full of curiosity to learn the reason for his unexpected summons, he

found Darch in the Sanctuary together with the blacksmith and Miss Hurst. Miles explained how the girl had suggested that the scroll should be taken from Hecate's hand, and how he had sat up all night reading the same and translating it. The Inspector listened to all this in amazement, and asked if there was anything in the leaden scroll likely to solve the mystery of the Sanctuary.

"It explains all about the statue," said Miles, holding out his translation. "If you read this you will learn what this accursed thing really is."

Jupp took the papers, looked at them doubtfully, and finally thrust them into his pocket. "You can explain," he said briskly. "I can't be bothered to read them now. It would take up too much time."

"Oh, I can explain in a few minutes," said Miles quickly. "You know, since you have heard the family legend, that Amyas Hurst travelled to Nuremberg, and brought his wife from that city."

"Yes; she was burnt as a witch, wasn't she?"

"Exactly! And her loss sent Amyas more or less out of his mind. At least, I think so, or he wouldn't have invented this beastly statue."

"How do you mean invented it, Miles?" asked Melicent, who was listening keenly. "It's merely a statue of Lady Hurst."

"It's more than that, Melicent. Have you heard of the Maid of Nuremberg, that horrible thing, which opens its arms and crushes people."

Jupp, who was a well-read man, nodded. "Is this statue formed on the same model?" he asked, glancing up at the figure.

"In a way. But you can see for yourself. The scroll says that there is machinery in the platform, which, when set in motion, causes the statue to open. Also in the right arm there is a long screw—you see that the arm is straight—which can be used to open

and shut the hand. As you might put it, there is an iron skeleton hand inside that leaden one, which can contract and open as the screw is worked."

"I see," said Jupp, while Melicent uttered an exclamation of surprise. "And Hurst found this out?"

"I think so; otherwise, how could the hand open and close. But you can examine the interior of the statue for yourself."

"One moment," said the Inspector, wishing to be fully informed of everything; "why did Amyas Hurst make such a statue?"

"He was mad, I think, as I said before," answered Miles frankly. "The burning of his beloved wife must have sent him off his head. And I fancy those people who disappeared in his days must have been decoyed here and thrust by Amyas Hurst into the statue to be crushed to death, just as was done in Nuremberg with the statue there."

"What a terrible idea," said Melicent, growing white. "And do you think—do you think," she faltered, "that Uncle Ralph is—is"—her voice failed her, and she could only point to the village.

"No! no! He couldn't have shut himself in. Anyone placed in the statue, I think, would have to be shut in by working the machinery."

"Jum went with him," said Melicent in a low tone of horror.

"I know. But I don't think your uncle would have allowed Jum to close him up in that image to starve or to be crushed to death. Besides, Jum can't be found any more than your uncle can."

"Well, let us see how the statue can be opened. Here, my man, have you your tools?" said Jupp to the blacksmith, who all this time had been standing by the image, looking at it with an awestruck air, and listening with all his might.

"Yes, sir. What am I to do, sir?" He addressed Miles, who referred to the copy of his translation which he had kept.

"Come here." The young man moved to the side of the platform on which the statue stood, and knelt down to run his hand along the stone face under the projecting bricks. For some time he was unsuccessful in finding what he wanted, but ultimately his face brightened. "Ah, here we are! You see this hole, Jupp? Well, by putting an instrument into this the statue can be opened and shut. It's like a watch being wound up. We haven't got the original instrument, but I dare say we'll manage. We really want a gigantic key."

But the thing was not done easily. The blacksmith took out his tools and fumbled away for a long time at the hole. Finally he had to break away the brickwork and lay bare a projecting iron shaft cut square at the end. By using a spanner, a pair of pincers and several other things, he managed to twist this round with some effort. Melicent uttered an exclamation, for she saw the body of the statue move.

"It's parting; it's parting," she cried, clapping her hands, "and see, Mr. Jupp, there's a crack down here all the way."

The Inspector, scarcely less excited than she was, hurried round to where she had gone, and saw indeed that a line was showing from the head to the heels of the image. Aided by Miles, the blacksmith turned the shaft slowly, as it was evidently rather rusty. All at once the working became easy and the shaft revolved rapidly. Jupp and Melicent on the other side watched the line widening gradually, as the statue parted slowly in two. Then the Inspector uttered a cry of amazement.

"There's a body inside," he said.

"Oh!" Melicent shrieked, "can it be Uncle Ralph?"

"No, it's a woman's body. See the dress—a black dress," cried Jupp, excited beyond measure, for he guessed what was coming.

Miles, knowing that it was easy to turn the shaft now, ran round to join the two spectators. The blacksmith twisted and twisted as hard as he was able, until the statue yawned widely. Then out of it, sideways, there tilted a body—the body of the woman. Spellbound, the three onlookers saw it come into the light of day and fall out of the vile image.

"Great heavens!" cried Miles, bending over the corpse, "it's Mrs. Frint!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

NEMESIS.

IN this way one of the three missing people returned, and most unexpectedly. Even Jupp, with his lifelong experience of crime, had never dreamed of such a thing. Like every one else, he had fully believed that Mrs. Frint was alive and, for some reason, in hiding. She had certainly been driven to Brant by her husband, for several of the servants had seen her depart with him, and also had seen the man return without her. There was not the slightest suspicion that Hurst had made away with the woman.

"I expect that when he left her at the Brant railway station," surmised the Inspector, "she followed him back instead of going to London as he desired her to do. This pertinacity probably made him kill her, as she knew too much about her husband's wickedness."

"But where did he murder her?" asked Melicent, who was more and more horrified by the recital of her uncle's criminality.

"In the study, I should think. You see, she has been stabbed to the heart, just as your father was, and probably with another weapon taken from the trophies of arms on the wall. It would be easy

for a powerful man like your uncle to carry the body into the Sanctuary and shut it up in the statue."

"How could Mrs. Frint get into the house?" asked Darch suddenly; "for if she had entered openly the servants would have seen her."

"Knowing the terms on which she was with her husband, I don't suppose she attempted to enter openly. But you remember, Mr. Darch, that Hurst said she knew the Hall better than he did himself, and this is proved by the way in which she concealed Mam'zel Clarice when I searched for her. Mrs. Frint, I believe, knew of some secret way by which she could enter. She did, and then Hurst got rid of her by violence. But there," Jupp waved his hand to suggest the impossibility of solving the problem, "this is all surmise. Until Hurst is caught and is forced to confess, we will never learn *all* the truth."

"We know a great deal of it," said Melicent, with a shudder.

"Yes, Miss Hurst; but we wish to know more. When we find your uncle and can arrest him——"

Darch interrupted the speaker in a positive way. "You may find him, Mr. Inspector, but I don't believe you will ever arrest him. He will blow himself up rather than surrender to be hanged."

"Blow himself up," Jupp looked puzzled, "how can he do that?"

"With a bomb that he bought from an anarchist in London some weeks ago."

"A bomb? The deuce!" Jupp looked uneasy. "It isn't a comfortable idea to think that a desperate man is lurking somewhere with a bomb. Out of revenge he may exterminate the whole lot of us. But what is he doing with a bomb?"

Darch explained, suppressing the true reason of

Hurst's visit to Struma. "I believe he intended to kill Melicent in that way. There, there, darling, I didn't intend to frighten you, but we may as well face the worst."

Melicent had started when she heard this bald speech, which was sufficient to shake the strongest nerve. Nevertheless, save turning a trifle paler, she did not blench, but only held her head higher. "Like Macbeth, I'm screwed up to the sticking point," she said defiantly; "and, come what may, I'm not going to be frightened any more."

"Bravo, Miss Hurst!" said the Inspector, with hearty admiration; "you are a real brick. I don't like the idea of a bomb in your uncle's hands, but it's part of my business to take risks. All the same, as I believe he is hidden somewhere about this place, perhaps it will be as well for you and the other ladies to go to Serbery until we catch him."

"No; I'll stay here with Miles," Melicent caught her lover's hand. "If we are to be blown up we may as well die together," for which brave speech—and it was brave—Miles kissed her, while Jupp applauded.

This conversation took place late in the afternoon, and long after the body of the unfortunate woman had been removed into the house. Smith had been called by the Inspector to examine the corpse, and said that Mrs. Frint had been stabbed to the heart just as her late master had been stabbed. So far as he could judge from the state of the body, he placed the date of the poor creature's death, some days back, which agreed with Jupp's belief that Hurst had got rid of her on the very night when he had driven her to the Brant station. Both the doctor and Darch agreed with Jupp's view that she had returned to denounce Hurst's crimes, and had been murdered by him to save himself from ex-

posure. Mrs. Frint still wore her black dress, a mantle, her bonnet and gloves, so, undoubtedly, entering the Hall by some secret way known to herself, she had come suddenly upon her wicked husband. It was probable that he had struck her down before she could alarm the house, and then had huddled the body into the statue with all speed. How the man was able to go about with two crimes on his conscience, Darch found it impossible to guess. His nerve must have been extraordinary, as the young man thought, especially when he remembered Ralph's hilarity on the night of the dinner party. He was certainly a villain, but an uncommonly bold one.

Melicent, warned by her lover, was careful not to recall to Lady Gibson the fact that Hurst was in possession of a bomb. Both she and Sylvia were horrified to hear of this fresh crime, and in considering it, Lady Gibson forgot about the bomb. If she had dwelt on the subject, and thought that Ralph would use the same, she would have been frightened out of her senses. As it was, she felt very much afraid, and Jupp had to be brought to her room to console her with a promise of his speedy capture. But this was making bad worse, for the poor woman immediately believed that, when in the hands of the law, Hurst would give away her secret. She became so agitated that Smith had to be sent for again, and he managed to pacify her more or less. Finally he induced her to go to bed, and take another sleeping draught. This settled things for the time being, as she fell into a deep slumber, and the two girls remained in the room, watching beside her bedside. Darch was thankful to get Melicent to stay with Sylvia, as he wished to have a talk with Inspector Jupp over the present aspect of affairs. Toby, of course, was still in attendance on Mam'zel Clarice,

who was as sound asleep as Lady Gibson appeared to be. So everything was all right in both these directions, and Miles was able to turn his attention to Jupp.

For Melicent's sake, the young man was anxious to hush up matters with regard to Ralph's wickedness. But this was clearly impossible. Although the Inspector had said nothing about the confession to the outside public, rumour had immediately reported Hurst to be the murderer of his brother, because he had disappeared. Then, owing to the presence of the blacksmith when the body was found, the murder of Mrs. Frint could not be concealed. It was believed that Ralph had murdered her also, and on that evening the whole village was in an uproar. Every one discussed the flight of the man and his abominable conduct, building up fresh stories of horror on insufficient foundations. The London and local reporters, who still lurked about the place, were scribbling as fast as they could, and wired to their respective papers promising fresh revelations regarding the mystery of the Black Image. For many centuries Grenacer had been a quiet, unknown village. Now, owing to the tragedies, it leaped into sudden fame. It was talked about in the newspapers ; it was given a place on the map ; and from one end of the kingdom to the other mention was being made of the crimes which had earned it so widespread and evil a reputation. Like Lord Byron, the village awoke to find itself famous, although not in an agreeable way.

Jupp came to the consultation in the library after dinner with an air of exultation, and sat down to produce a long blue envelope out of his pocket.

"Do you know what this is?" he asked the barrister.

"No!" retorted Miles, rather snappishly, for his nerves were worn thin by constant unpleasant surprises. "More trouble?"

"In one way, yes; in another way, no," answered Jupp with a shrug. "I now know what a complete scoundrel Hurst is, and at the same time the knowledge will help me to arrive at some conclusion how to put things straight."

"I hope you *will* be able to put them straight," sighed the lawyer, "for I am getting quite dazed with all this worry."

"Very naturally, very naturally. However, I won't keep you in suspense any longer." He drew several sheets of foolscap from the envelope. "This is the full confession of Mrs. Frint as to her dealings with that blackguard—and he *is* a blackguard," said Jupp, frowning, "one of the worst."

"It didn't need Mrs. Frint's confession to tell me that, Jupp. Where did you find it?"

"In the pocket of her dress. I didn't examine the clothes for some time, but after Smith looked at the body I went up, with two of my men, and searched her pockets. I found this," he tapped the loose sheets. "Evidently she anticipated that Hurst, driven into a corner, might murder her, and so wrote out all she knew about him. This statement clears Mam'zel Clarice completely, as Hurst confessed to his wife that he murdered his brother in order to get possession of the property, if possible."

"And Melicent? Does the confession say that he intended to murder Melicent?"

"It does. But Hurst never told his wife so. She only suspected it, because of his saying that he wanted the family property. For that reason she did her best to save the girl, and got that boy to help her."

"Read it."

"No ; I'll tell it, and you can read it for yourself later." Jupp replaced the loose sheets in the envelope and began his story. "It seems that Mrs. Frint was born in the village and lived all her life at the Hall, beginning as a nursemaid and ending as the housekeeper. She was a pretty girl, and Hurst, who seemed to have had a keen eye for beauty, married her."

"I thought John Frint, the bailiff, did."

"That was a blind. Ralph explained that as he had run through his money and was dependent on his brother for bread and butter, he could not make the marriage public without losing everything. Mrs. Frint—we can still continue to call her so—was madly in love with the man, and agreed to conceal the marriage until such time as it could be revealed with safety. She went to London pretending to be married to John Frint, and really was married to Ralph Hurst. Frint was bribed by Hurst to go to America, and there, after some years, he died. The woman returned to the Hall as Mrs. Frint, and afterwards Hurst returned too, in order to look after the estate as his brother's bailiff. The position remained thus for many years."

"But why didn't Mrs. Frint object ? If she was lawfully Ralph's wife I can't see why she should have been content with the position of housekeeper."

"Well, you never know women," drawled the Inspector with a shrug. "Ralph, it seems, was her master, and rather a tyrant. She adored him and obeyed him in every way. He was always promising her that he would acknowledge the marriage as soon as he could do so with safety. In one way and another he managed to get her to hold her tongue."

"And the announcement of Hurst's engagement to Sylvia ?"

"I'm coming to that. Let us proceed in due

order," said Jupp quickly. "In the first place, Hurst was very angry when he heard that his brother was to marry Miss Gibson. But we know all about that and how he acted from the statement of Mam'zel Clarice."

Miles nodded. "Let us come to the murder of the Squire."

"Mrs. Frint did not see it, but she forced a confession from Hurst."

"How did she manage that?"

"Well, you know that the window of her first bedroom overlooked the Sanctuary. On the night of the murder Mrs. Frint was suspicious of her husband and watched him. Though, for the matter of that," added Jupp, "she was always suspicious and always watchful, which can scarcely be wondered at."

"I agree, considering how he treated her. Well?"

"Well, Mrs. Frint, watching from her bedroom window, could see the light streaming from the Squire's study into the Sanctuary, and knew that her master was still staying up reading. Then she thought she heard a cry and opened her window to listen. She saw Ralph carry a body to the statue and shut it up in it."

"But did she know that the statue was hollow?"

"Yes," said the Inspector, promptly and unexpectedly. "It seems that Hurst, as we guessed, by poking about amongst the family papers, learned the secret of the statue. Mrs. Frint came upon him unexpectedly in the library reading the document, and told him that the Squire wished to see him. That was why she came, but when Hurst left the library she looked at the document. It consisted of several loose sheets, and Ralph had apparently read two. The third one she took away."

"Why?"

"Well, the first two sheets told what we know about the opening of the image and the way in which the hand could be opened and shut. The remaining sheet said that there was a kind of sliding trap-door immediately under the feet of Hecate in the platform. When this was drawn aside, by means of a winch worked from the other side of the platform, it gave access to a cave. And it seemed that when Amyas Hurst shut up his victims in the statue, later on he opened the trap-door and they fell into the cave below. Then he took the bodies to the Gren, through the cave, and sank them, with stones, to the bottom."

"Horrible," said Miles with dismay, and shuddering. "So that was how people disappeared in Amyas Hurst's day?"

Jupp nodded. "The man seemed to have gone mad and wished to revenge his wife, for it was owing to the clamour of the villagers that she was burnt as a witch. There is another exit from the cave, which opens on to the bank of the Gren, and through this Amyas Hurst dragged his victims. Being weighted with stones, of course they sank to the bottom of the stream and were never found again."

"I see; but why did Mrs. Frint take away the third sheet?"

"Because she doubted her husband and believed that he might make some bad use of the information. He had already read the first two sheets describing the mechanism of that horrible statue, so it was useless to take those. But he had not read the last sheet, which revealed the whereabouts of the cave and the fact that all details of the same were engraved on the scroll in the hands of the image."

"So Ralph never knew about the cave or the scroll."

"No; he accused Mrs. Frint of removing the third sheet, but she swore that she had not touched it, and he had to hold his tongue about the loss, as she said she would tell the Squire about the matter if he made trouble. So you see, Mr. Darch, that Mrs. Frint knew that the statue was hollow, and quite understood that her husband was hiding a body in the same."

"Did she know the body was that of Mam'zel Clarice?"

"No; she believed it was that of the Squire. She hurried down and found the door of the study locked—you remember that Mam'zel said she locked the door in her confession. Hurst heard her knocking and fled. He climbed up the ladder, over the wall, and down by the chestnut tree. Then he took Mam'zel's motor-cycle she had left by his instructions on the verge of the wood, and rode to London."

"What did Mrs. Frint do?"

"She remembered the cave and believed that she could get hold of the Squire's body to hide it lest her husband should be accused. Remember, so far she believed it *was* the Squire's body which was hidden in the statue. She ran upstairs and wakened Jum to help her. Then the two got out of the house by the postern and hurried round to the wood. Mrs. Frint already knew where the entrance to the cave was and how to lift the stone, as she had made an examination shortly after reading the third sheet. Along with Jum she entered the cave, worked the winch, and Mam'zel Clarice fell into the cave."

"Much to Mrs. Frint's astonishment," said Miles, greatly excited over the story, which certainly was wild enough.

"Yes; she expected to find the Squire. However, discovering that the woman was only stunned,

she and Jum carried her back to the house and hid her in Mrs. Frint's bedroom. Then she was transferred to the garrets when the housekeeper changed her bedroom. You know the rest."

Miles nodded. "Why didn't Mrs. Frint tell her husband?"

"She doubted him and wished to have a weapon with which to control him. So she said nothing, for the time being, and made Jum hold his tongue. I expect in the long run she would have told the truth. But meanwhile she did tell Hurst that she had seen him carrying a body to the statue, and forced him to admit having committed the crime."

"Wasn't Hurst astonished by the disappearance of the woman's body?"

"Yes; he taxed his wife with removing it, since he knew she had read the two sheets of the manuscript. She did not tell him that Mam'zel Clarice was alive and in her bedroom, but said that she had taken the body from the statue and had sunk it in the river. She wanted to keep Mam'zel in reserve as a weapon against Hurst, you see. And when Hurst became engaged to Miss Gibson she swore that she would produce evidence that he had killed his brother unless he acknowledged the marriage with herself."

"Did Ralph then suspect that Mam'zel Clarice was alive?"

"Oh, yes! Mrs. Frint told him afterwards, but refused to say where she was hidden. Ralph then said that if she would go to London he would later acknowledge the marriage. As you know, he dismissed her and drove her to the station."

"And then?"

"Then the statement ends. But I expect Mrs. Frint came back and was murdered by the beast since she knew enough to hang him twice over."

"Why didn't Jum, who was devoted to his aunt, work the trap door under the statue and discover the murder?"

"Because I don't believe he knew that Mrs. Frint was dead. He thought, as we all did, that she had gone to London, since Hurst drove her to Brant. I don't know what to make of the boy," added Jupp, scratching his head. "It seems to me that he is in league with Hurst since he went away with him."

"I don't think so. He loved his aunt too much. I believe the boy is sticking to Hurst so as to hand him over in the long run to you."

"It might be so," said Jupp doubtfully; "but I have my own opinion, and it doesn't agree with yours, Mr. Darch."

"Jum asked me to trust him," said the barrister firmly, "and I'm going to trust him."

"Well, we'll see," Jupp rose. "Meanwhile, let us have a look at the cave to-morrow. I'd like to see the whole devilish contrivance."

"So should I," replied Darch, with a yawn. "Your story is very interesting, Mr. Inspector, but I don't see how it straightens out things as you said it would."

"At all events this confession proves Mam'zel Clarice to be completely innocent," snapped Jupp, rather discomposed.

"Yes; but it doesn't enable us to capture Hurst, and that's the main thing, Mr. Inspector. He has that bomb, you know, and may blow up the Hall at any moment. I wish we could get hold of Jum. He would be able to tell us where Hurst is hiding."

Darch finished with another yawn and then gave a cry of surprise, which was echoed by the Inspector. As if in answer to his name, Jum crept into the room, a grimy, ragged little figure, thin and pale. With a gasp of relief he saw Darch and the officer,

tottering towards them rather than walking, for so worn out was the lad that he could scarcely stand. He staggered towards the lawyer and clutched his arm fiercely.

"Come with me, sir. I've got him."

"Hurst," shouted the Inspector, recovering from his surprise.

"Yes ; I stuck to him and guided him to a hiding-place that I knew so that I could get him arrested."

"The cave ?" said Darch suddenly.

"Do you know of the cave, sir ?"

"Yes, I—here, Jum, drink this wine or you'll faint." Miles hastily poured out a glass of port from a bottle which Jupp had been enjoying during the conversation and passed it to the boy.

"Is Hurst in that cave under the statue ?" asked Jupp impatiently, while the boy drank the wine, of which he stood in much need.

"Yes ; I took him there, sir. We climbed over the walls of the Sanctuary when Mr. Ralph heard Mam'zel was able to talk. I took him to the cave, pretending to be his friend. He believed me at first, but afterwards he became suspicious, and when I wanted to go out he wouldn't let me. But he fell asleep, and I managed to escape and——"

"You can tell the rest another time, my boy," said Jupp, hurrying to the door. "In the meantime, come and show me where this cave is. I must get my men."

Jum was more in need of rest and food than anything else, but the wine had put new life into him, and with an indomitable spirit he promised to lead the way to the mysterious cave. All the time he clung to Darch's hand and guided Jupp with his five men to the spot. They went down the avenue, along the wall of the park and entered the wood surrounding the walls of the Sanctuary. Here, on the side

facing the river, Jum pointed to a large moss-grown stone, beneath which no one would have suspected a cavity. He also hauled out of the underwood a handle which could be fitted on to a square nut. The nut itself was the square-cut end of a shaft in the wall. The mechanism to raise the stone was similar to that which had opened the image of Hecate, primitive, but good enough for its purpose. Jupp immediately got to work, but not without a warning from the boy.

"He's got a bomb," said Jum faintly, "and he'll use—use—it," his voice trailed away into a weak whisper, and he fell fainting on the ground, worn out by privation and excitement. Darch picked the little hero up in his arms. Jupp, undaunted by the warning, soon had the stone raised and ventured himself down the steps which were revealed. But scarcely had he set his foot on the first step when there came a hollow boom, and he was fairly blown out of the cavity. The boom was followed by a roar and from beyond the walls masses of earth and trees and stones and lead were thrown up. The tremendous explosion shook the whole place, and a vivid flare of red flame illuminated the dark sky far and wide. In a moment Darch guessed that Hurst, rather than betaken, had exploded the bomb and, with Jum in his arms, ran away. The policemen and detectives seized hold of the Inspector, who had been rendered insensible by the explosion, and fell back. They and Darch were just in time, for scarcely had they got to the verge of the wood than the wall of the Sanctuary fell with a loud crash, breaking the trees and scattering bricks everywhere. Then came a horrified pause.

"The whole place is blown to bits," cried Darch, and laying Jum gently on the ground he ran forward followed by the men.

He was right. The roof of the cave had been blown out, the yew trees and cypress trees were torn down and tumbled about, while the famous Black Image was shattered to atoms. And below all the debris lay the body of the rash villain who had discovered the secret of Amyas Hurst to his own undoing.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE WHOLE TRUTH.

GREAT as had been the sensation before the explosion, it was greater still after that catastrophe took place. In spite of the late hour the villagers from Grenacer flocked to the ruined Sanctuary, and it took all the efforts of the constables on guard to prevent them from meddling. And, of course, the policemen were not going to allow anything to be touched until their superior officer came to his senses. This did not take longer than an hour, for Jupp was only slightly stunned, having knocked his head against a tree-trunk when blown out of the cavity. When in full possession of his brain-power he bound a wet cloth round his head and directed operations. As the hour was late and the night was dark, nothing could be done until the morning. But the villagers still persisted in remaining near the Hall, and it is recorded in Grenacer chronicles that no one went to bed that night. From the sleep of centuries the villagers had awakened thoroughly. The moral as well as the physical effects of the explosion shook them into active life. Therefore, as one of them remarked, it was a true proverb that said: "It's an ill wind that blows nobody any good."

Next day the place was like Barnet Fair. From

Serbery, from Brant, from all kinds of unknown hamlets in the surrounding country, people came on foot, on bicycles, and in vehicles of every description. The news of the last phase of the crime was telegraphed to London by enthusiastic reporters, and with the early trains more reporters arrived, along with photographers belonging to weekly and daily illustrated papers. The village inn was filled with people who meant to stay for a few days and see the thing out to its bitter end. That the end had really come never occurred to any one, since the case had gone on affording sensation after sensation for so long. But this was the purely thoughtless opinion of the general public, for Darch knew that everything was over once and for all. The Black Image, with its luck, bad and good, had disappeared, and with it disappeared all further trouble.

The shock of the explosion startled Lady Gibson, and threw her into hysterics. But when she learned that Hurst was dead she revived wonderfully, and sent for Miles the first thing in the morning. To his surprise he found her quite her old self, although slightly older-looking. She was painted and powdered as of yore, beautifully dressed, and was as ready to shrug and use her lorgnette as ever. Darch expressed his surprise to Sylvia, who stood beside her mother with a brighter face than usual. Lady Gibson overheard his speech and laughed gaily.

"My dear man, can't you see that everything is all right?" she said, with her famous shrug. "Now that bad man is dead no one will ever know the secret about my early marriage save you and I, Sylvia and Struma."

"Will Struma hold his tongue?"

"Oh, yes!" Lady Gibson waved her lorgnette lightly. "He never meant to tell that horrid

creature as it was. Ralph wormed the secret out of him and held it over me in the abominable way you know of. But, thank heaven, he is dead and will never be my son-in-law."

"And who is to be your son-in-law, Lady Gibson?" asked Miles seriously.

"Why, Toby Smith, of course. Oh, yes, I call him Toby now, though it does sound like the name of a French poodle! I have learned a lesson, Miles," she became grave, "and although I speak lightly I am deeply thankful to Providence for saving me from shame and Sylvia from that horrible marriage. Poor as Toby is, I am quite willing that he should marry my daughter. Although," Lady Gibson shrugged and became frivolous again, "goodness only knows how we are to manage things. I can see nothing before us but the Bankruptcy Court. I haven't a shilling."

"I don't think you'll go through the Bankruptcy Court," said Darch, smiling, as he thought of Uncle George and his little plot.

"How nice of you to say so; but miracles don't occur nowadays."

"I think they do," said Miles dryly; "if you will think over the events of the last month or so."

"I don't want to think of them," said Lady Gibson, with a shiver. "That policeman Jupp has told me and Sylvia and Melicent the whole story from first to last. It's horrible."

"So horrible that I wish he hadn't said anything to Melicent. She has had so much to bear that this new knowledge will break her down."

"Oh, no, it won't! She is relieved by the death of her uncle, as we all are, for it would have been disagreeable had he lived to be hanged. Melicent said that you refused to tell her the story after the explosion, and sent her to bed."

"I did. I thought it was best she should sleep."

"I don't think any one of us slept," said Sylvia wearily; "and Melicent went downstairs to see the Inspector as soon as it was light. She brought him up here, as my mother was anxious to hear the truth, and he told us all."

"And you would have heard it also if you hadn't been asleep, Miles," said Lady Gibson with great vivacity.

"You forget that I knew all the story before the explosion took place," was Darch's reply. "What are you going to do, Lady Gibson?"

"Return to town to-day," she answered promptly. "I really cannot stay here after all these horrors. Then Toby can come to town in a few days, and we can arrange about the wedding. You should get married at the same time, Miles, as I am sure Melicent can't be left alone in this dreadful place."

"I intend to persuade Melicent to consent to an early wedding," said Darch with a smile, and then left the room, to find Smith and congratulate him on the behaviour of Lady Gibson regarding his romance with Sylvia.

To Darch's surprise he found not only Toby but Uncle George. The old merchant had returned from Paris on the previous day, and on hearing of the stirring events at Grenacer he had come down by an early train.

"Were you successful in finding out anything in Paris?" asked Darch.

"About Lady Gibson's secret?" answered Uncle George. "Oh, no! I found that Hurst told a lie about Mam'zel having been in the secret service of the French police. She never had anything to do with them, so how Hurst learned the secret I can't say, no more than I can guess why he told a lie about the woman."

"It was all part of the plot to implicate Mam'zel in the murder," said Miles musingly. "He wished to give her the credit for his many evil inventions, in the hope that they would bring her to the scaffold and save himself. An ordinary woman would not have thought of such things, but a woman who had been in the secret service abroad might."

Toby nodded. "I quite see Hurst's idea," he said, "and I may as well tell you, Miles, that Mam'zel is now all right. She only needs nursing to be quite herself, as she won't lose her senses again. I taxed her with being in the French secret service, and she denied that she had been. Hurst said she was, so as to account for the clever way in which the crime was executed, presumably by her. Poor creature, I am glad she escaped in spite of her folly with regard to the Squire, which really is at the root of all the trouble."

"That man was a fiend," said Uncle George vigorously; "and this secret of Lady Gibson's which he knew——"

"Oh, it really wasn't a secret," broke in Miles, telling a very white lie to shield the poor woman. "Hurst threatened to murder her unless she consented to his marrying her daughter."

"Oh, that was the reason, was it?" said the old man, accepting the explanation in all good faith. "Well, he was quite capable of doing it, seeing how he murdered his wife and brother and then blew himself up. I'm sorry I didn't see the statue, however," added Uncle George with real regret. "It must have been very interesting."

"Very," assented Miles grimly. "All the same, I'm glad it has been destroyed."

"So am I," added Toby. "And I'm glad also that Hurst is dead. We're just going up to see Lady Gibson and Sylvia, Miles. Don't you

think that they are both looking surprisingly well, considering."

"Oh, yes!" Miles assented readily enough. "They seem to have awakened from a nightmare," and privately, the young man thought that they had.

So while Toby and his uncle went upstairs, Miles sought the dining-room, where Melicent was giving the Inspector his breakfast. Jupp looked wonderfully bright and lively in spite of his bandaged head. Like every one else he was thankful that the mystery of the crimes and of the statue had been solved. While eating he commented on the matter.

"I assure you, Darch, this case is the most wonderful within my experience, and I have been congratulating Miss Hurst on its end," he said, nodding towards Melicent, who still looked pale and worn.

"We have all reason for congratulation," said Miles, walking round the table to sit by the girl and take her hand. "Try and cheer up, Melicent. Bad as things have been, we have much cause to be thankful. If your uncle had lived he would have met with a worse fate."

"Yes! I'm glad that he had the courage to kill himself," she said faintly; "although it sounds horrible to say so."

"Well, Miss Hurst," Jupp reached for the marmalade as he spoke, "I'm glad for your sake that he killed himself, as it would have been disagreeable for you to have a relative hanged. But I'm sorry for my own. The case would have made a sensation had he been tried for the two murders."

"I don't know what greater sensation you expected it to make," said Miles, raising his eyebrows. "The village is crowded with people from all quarters and your men can hardly keep them out of the park.

However, let us hope it will only be a nine days' wonder, and that soon Grenacer will quieten down."

"It won't quieten down until the inquest is held on Mrs. Frint and on the remains we have found of Hurst," said the Inspector. "He blew himself up, and the image along with him, very thoroughly."

"Oh, don't!" murmured Melicent, turning white.

"Sorry, Miss Hurst," said Jupp, who was really good-natured, "my tongue runs away with me at times. I think, if you don't mind my offering advice, that you should leave this place for a time."

"She will leave it with me when we are married," said the barrister; "and while we are away the Sanctuary can be put right."

"How put right?" asked Jupp, rising from the table.

"All the remaining trees will be pulled down, the walls will be levelled to the ground, and when the ruins are removed we will plant a garden there. I suggest doing this if you will agree, Melicent."

"Oh, yes!" she said, the colour returning to her face. "I want to see the whole place changed. But tell me, Mr. Jupp, what's to be done now?"

"Nothing that need worry you," said the Inspector kindly. "Try and rest after all your trouble, Miss Hurst. I'll arrange all about the inquests, and settle things. Lady Gibson and her daughter return to town to-day as there is no need for them to stay here. Mam'zel Clarice, the doctor says, is getting well, and will be able to go away in a few days."

"I intend to give her a good sum of money with which to return to Paris and find employment," said Melicent, flushing. "I'm sorry for the poor creature."

"So am I, as sorry as I am for Mrs. Frint. Both those women suffered much at the hands of your

uncle. Extraordinary," mused Jupp, pinching his chin.

"What is extraordinary?" asked Miles, surprised.

"The way in which that man changed. I knew him well for years and he was always a student, shut up in his library. A quiet, harmless creature."

"Scarcely, Jupp. All the time he was pretending to be a harmless creature he was married to that poor woman and was plotting how to get rid of his brother, secure the property and marry Miss Gibson."

"Quite so," said Jupp, then fixed his eyes on Melicent: "Do you really think that he arranged those accidents, Miss Hurst, so as to get rid of you?"

"Yes." Melicent clasped her hands. "Jum told me. I went to see him this morning, and he is much better after a night's sleep, although still weak."

"Curious he should be so, since he told me he had taken food to the cave before he inveigled Hurst there."

"It's the shock and the horror of the whole business that has weakened him, Mr. Jupp. But he said that Uncle Ralph told him to buy a pea-shooter and peas, and then told him to come up the stairs, where he playfully made a snatch at the bag and scattered the peas."

"Who snatched—Jum or your uncle?"

"Uncle Ralph. He pretended that he wanted the bag, and snatched. It burst and the peas were scattered. Uncle Ralph said that Jum needn't pick them up, and Jum suspected his motive. So did Mrs. Frint, and they watched over me. I slipped on the landing at the top of the stairs and saved myself. But if I had tried to come down Jum would have prevented me."

"Why didn't he warn you?"

"Mrs. Frint wouldn't let him lest I should suspect

Uncle Ralph and get him into trouble. She wanted to save him, as he was her husband, but she always intended to save me also."

"Hum, I see! And the fallen branch of the elm?"

"That was sawn through, Jum says. When Uncle Ralph pretended to go to the vicarage he really was in the wood behind me holding a string attached to the branch. As soon as I was seated he pulled the string and the branch came down. But Jum, who was watching, saved me."

"Yes, I remember," said Miles, deeply interested. "And then your uncle came running round the corner to scold you for sitting under the tree; to remove the string, I suppose, and have the fallen branch cut up."

"He did more than that," said the girl with a shudder. "He climbed the tree himself after dusk and splintered the sawn branch—that is, the place where he had sawn the branch off."

"Well, you've had narrow escapes, Miss Hurst," said Jupp, "and should be glad that your uncle is dead. Jum ought to be rewarded. I'd do something for the boy myself, if needs be, for I suspected him wrongly. He was on our side all the time."

"He was," said Darch positively. "His pretended reconciliation with Hurst was only to get friendly with him again so that he could watch him easily. We owe a lot to Jum, and I shall repay him by getting him into a lawyer's office. He wants to be a solicitor."

"And he'll make a good one," said Jupp heartily. "More power to his elbow."

The next week was a busy one. The inquests were held; the body of Mrs. Frint and what remained of her wicked husband were buried, and after long and picturesque accounts of the final phases of the

Black Image mystery appeared in many papers, the excitement died down. The tide of human life that had flooded Grenacer receded and the village was left to its somnolent existence. Yet it was less somnolent than of yore, for the late excitement had awakened the population to life, and they took greater interest in the world beyond their borders. But they did not wish to have another shaking up of the same kind. The crimes of Ralph Hurst, and the legend of the statue, were enough to serve them with food for gossip year in and year out for many a long day.

Sylvia and Toby were married almost immediately, as Uncle George insisted that the ceremony should take place as soon as possible. Lady Gibson was quite willing, even before she knew of the income which Toby was to have, for late events had rendered her much more reasonable and sensible. But it was a great relief to her when Uncle George generously paid her debts and arranged that she should be allowed a certain yearly income. Tahinos came forward again to court Sylvia, but Lady Gibson would not hear of any one becoming her son-in-law but Toby, to whom she had taken a great fancy. With a splendid income, a charming wife, and his own talents, which were considerable, Toby set up practice in Harley Street, and bid fair to become quite a famous and fashionable doctor. The young couple were very happy, and were always grateful to Uncle George, who continued to act the fairy-godfather on all and every occasion. And Lady Gibson was likewise agreeable and complimentary, growing prouder and prouder of her children and grandchildren as the years went by. Adversity had done her good.

In due time, also, Melicent became Mrs. Darch. She and Miles were married in the village church,

and Jum was conspicuous at the wedding. The boy was sent by the young couple to school for a few years, and from thence it was intended he should be taken to London and placed in a solicitor's office. So Jum's future was assured, for Melicent thought that she could not do enough for him, seeing that he had saved her life. But once Jum was settled as a respectable member of society, under his own name of Frederick Marr, Melicent shunned talking of the past. Along with her husband she went for a long tour round the world, and it was quite two years before they returned to the Hall. Then the villagers welcomed them with flags and flowers, with addresses and many compliments, rejoiced to have their Lady of the Manor back in their midst. Miles, who had lived so long in Grenacer, was also a great favourite, and the reign of the new rural king and queen promised to be glorious and peaceful. During their absence the house had been redecorated and the grounds put to rights. So thus it came about that after dinner Mr. and Mrs. Darch stood at the door of the late Squire's study looking, not at the Sanctuary with its gloomy yews and grim Black Image, but at a circle of quick-growing trees, through the branches of which could be seen the gleam of the river. And there were smooth green lawns and beds of roses in full bloom, so that the place looked like a fairyland. Melicent said so, and her husband agreed.

"It is a place of life now," he said, with his arm round her waist. "It was a place of death when we left."

"Don't talk of it," cried Mrs. Darch with a shiver. "I never wish to recall that horrible image."

"Yet, if the statue had not been blown up, I doubt if you would have consented to its removal," said Miles, laughing.

"Perhaps not. All the same, I am glad it is gone. It was built for an evil purpose, and brought nothing but evil."

"Well, it's gone, and has taken its evil with it. Don't let us talk of the past, Melicent darling, but look to the future. We have health, wealth and a charming home, together with love, which is the best thing of all. But we must not be idle, dearest. You shall be the Lady Bountiful of the village, and I shall go daily to London to renew my attempts to be Lord Chancellor."

"So long as I have you," said Melicent, resting her head against his breast, "it matters little what you are. Still, we must work."

"Of course. And see what a good omen that golden sunset is for our future, dear. When we last saw this place it was a heap of ruins under a dark and dismal sky. Now it is glorious with colour and splendid with golden light."

"And the Black Image was——"

"Not a word about that horrible statue," said Miles, stopping her mouth with a kiss. "Come to the drawing-room and let us talk of our future. Sylvia and Toby are happy; Jum is happy. Let us be happy also."

"I always am with you," said Melicent, and then they exchanged another kiss before re-entering the house, leaving the rose-garden bathed in golden splendour to wait for the coming shadows of night.

THE END.

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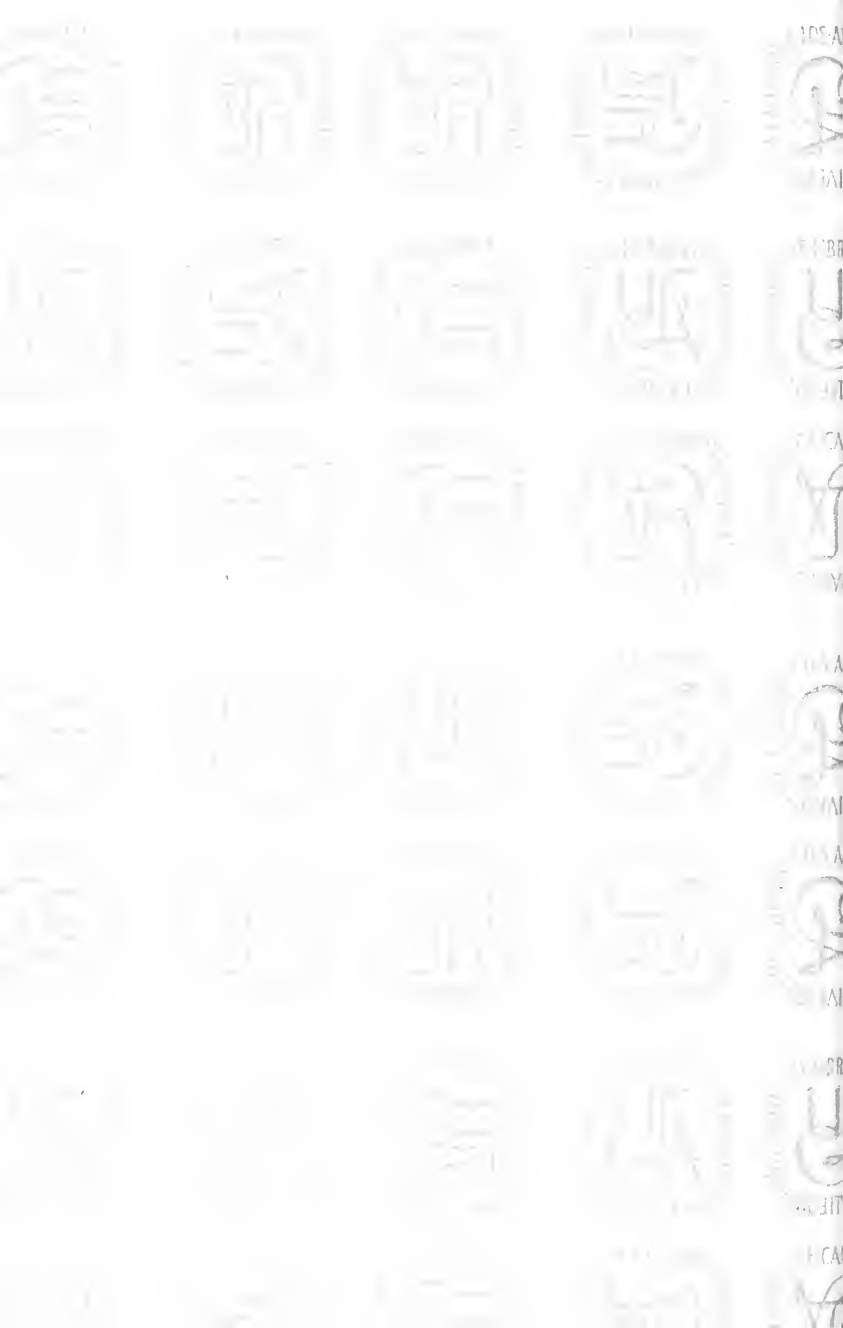
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